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SOME OF THE ENGLISH

A STUDY TOWARDS A STUDY

BY
OLIVER MADOX HUEFFER

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J. RADCLIFFE,
Borough Librarian.

AT a time when I was living in a little city not very far from Paris an American friend came to me on a short visit. As he was crossing the Atlantic for the first time and spoke no French, I thought it well to meet him at his landing port and afterwards to drive him back to my home through the pleasant French countryside, then in all the glory of high summer. Unfortunately his arrival coincided with the English August Bank Holiday and the port was crowded with day-trippers of the lower class, and before we left my friend was given an unpleasant insight into the way in which some of the English, at least, seek their pleasures abroad.

I was the more annoyed that my friend was foolish enough—as some would have it—or wise enough as I think—to be a lover of England and the English, though his knowledge was not, as I have said, gained at first hand, and it irked me bitterly that his first introduction to them should have been under circumstances so unfavourable. But I found, when the opportunity came, that the incident had left little impression on his mind. He was, instead, full of a tragedy that had shortly before befallen at a place and in a country we both knew

very well, and had, indeed, dwelt in, for a time, together.

An elderly Englishwoman was the heroine. She was the owner of a hacienda in the Republic of Mexico, and efforts were made to dispossess her under an unjust law, and bandits—or troops, for it is not easy to distinguish between them in times of civil strife in Mexico—besieged her, and she defied them all and fought them back, and at last was foully murdered with the Flag still waving over her unconquerable. And, as I say, his reverence for her stout heart overbore in my friend's imagination the memory of the drunken hooligans at Boulogne-sur-Mer.

A friend of England and her great records, he spoke of that dead Englishwoman as being typical of her race, and he cited the names of that very gallant gentleman, Captain Oates, and the men of Zeebrugge, and Minnie Wells, a servant girl, of whom he had read, in a newspaper of the day, as having given up her own life to save her employer's children from death by fire, and of others who, in our time, have held high the golden badge of English courage and fidelity.

Later, when we sat in the pleasant shade of my lime-tree quinconce, sipping our wine and fighting our old battles over again, he reverted to the English theme, and spoke of their pride of race, and he reminded me of a journey we made long since together across the Southern continent when, he vowed, with a malicious eye, I would make horrible the darkness by intoning "Rule Britannia!"—though I am sure I never did. And I countered with the truer memory how he had

been angered by the tactless natives who—when they wished to assure him, a 100 per cent. American, that they meant honestly by him—would add, " Palabra Ingles ! " or, as we should have it, " On the word of an Englishman ! "

Honours being thus easy, he questioned me, as he had earned the right to do, upon other aspects of the English character, some of them less amiable. He did not, indeed, refer to the trippers of Boulogne, but chiefly to certain Britons of a higher pretension who, by their tactlessness and obstinate conceit, showed themselves, in America, but sorry fuglemen for their country. And, passing from the particular to the general, mentioned how it was common report, in certain circles and among certain people of America, prejudiced though they might be, that England was in her decadence, the mere deceptive shadow of her former greatness, her people having lost that enterprising genius that wrote the name of England largest of all upon the map, that—though admittedly with many and important exceptions—they were become a slow, almost a stupid people, slow to see or seeing to understand or understanding to accept new methods and new ideas ? Was this, he asked, the truth, or partly true, or only the spiteful tittle-tattle of our enemies ?

I told him that at least one world-figure, a certain Kun Bela, a famous leader of Communists, was of that belief. That, having adventured into Hungary during its short-lived Communist régime after the European War, I had there been imprisoned, but later released

by Mr. Kun. That Mr. Kun had then told me he had little hope of establishing Communist rule in England, because the English were at once too stupid, too servile, too obstinate, and too self-satisfied to realise the benefits he offered them.

My friend—and let me emphasise that we knew each other well enough, and had shared enough experiences to be, not merely an Englishman and an American, but just two men, which is to say two friends, who could speak freely without fear of offence—my friend asked me many questions about that strange people, the English, who were at once so hated and so respected, so feared and so contemned, who had so little of imagination that they had not feared to overrun the world—(Was it not a French critic, Monsieur Jules Janin, who declared that only the English were fools enough to have conceived the idea of conquering and holding India, that a Frenchman would have realised from the beginning that it was ridiculous?) —yet so great a political vision as to have evolved the most practical form of Government known to the world; who, seemingly slow of wit, had yet given birth to the greatest of poets and philosophers; who were, in fine, like that national "punch" of theirs of which the Frenchman wrote, "First you put in the whiskey to make it strong, then you put in the water to make it weak; then you put in the lemon to make it sour and the sugar to make it sweet; then you say, 'Here's to you!' and drink it yourself!"

Before he left me he said, "I wish you could have told me more about the English. You have told me a

lot about the French and more about the Americans than I knew myself"—his eyes twinkled with malice —" but about the English, of whom you really ought to know something, you have told me scarcely anything." And as we parted he added, as an Englishman might have done, " After all, we have more or less got to rule the world between us, you and I. Isn't it about time we began to understand each other a little ? "

When he had gone and I was recalling the pleasant incidents of his visit, I found myself realising why I had been able to tell him so little about the English. I was in fact little better acquainted with them than was he. Owing to the accident of my employment, I knew less of England and the English in the decade which followed the European War than of half a dozen other lands and peoples. Yet during that time they had, by general account, undergone changes of circumstance and fortune as deep-reaching, if not as unhappily dramatic, as had any of the other combatants in that world-struggle. And I found myself echoing my friend's frequent question, " Who are now these English and what like ? "

Certain fundamental facts were obvious enough. We have it, on high poetic authority, that " Saxon and Norman and Dane are we," to say nothing of those Celts whom the poet, or his metrical exigences, forgot. We are, in fact, a mongrel race, the less galling to remember if we realise that the mongrel is at once the hardiest, the most intelligent and the most faithful of dogs, and that, within the limits of the same races the men of mixed blood have cut the deepest swathes in

history. Now, it is a curious thing that the strains which together make up a nation, whether it be Germany or France, England or the United States, seldom or never merge into one strain, but remain distinct, as several threads of varied hues blend to make up a general pattern. In the Americas, as is now recognised, the "melting pot" has found its mixed masses of racial material intractable; so it is in France, where the Norman and the Breton, the Lorrainer and the Provençal remain, while forming together a Republic one and indivisible, as distinct in character as when they were subjects of different Princes. And just as it is impossible to say that the Virginian is more truly American than the Middle Westerner, the Californian than the New Englander, so is it when you come to consider the English. The Dalesman and the Man of Kent; the Wiltshire moon-raker and the "Lad fra Lancashire"; the Yarmouth fisherman and the Herefordshire farm-hand; all are alike Englishmen—to many of them, indeed, all the rest are little better than foreigners—yet in character and kind they differ widely enough to produce contradictory characteristics sufficient for a continent instead of one small demi-island.

In one point, however, England differs from her sister nations—in the composition of London, her capital city. For while New York is, of all the great cities of the United States, perhaps the least American, while Paris has become so internationalised as to have scarcely anything in common with French France, London is the real heart of England, the true melting-

pot, in which all the Saxon and Norman and Danish and British strains of blood have been mixed and blended until the result can truly be called English. For how many generations of countrymen was not London the dream-city paved with gold, the irresistible magnet drawing to it the best blood of all the countryside? True that it became exhausted in the mixing—I have heard that a country family settled in London becomes extinct within three generations—but there are always more adventurers hurrying up to take their place, so that the ultimate Cockney can boast that in his veins and his alone flows the best blood of all the Englands.

Be it granted that during the long centuries of her hegemony strains altogether foreign have mingled with the pure English blood of London. Especially, of course, was this the case during the prosperous industrial era of the last century, when the needy of half Europe rushed to the English Yukon as later to America. But they were never in such numbers as to defy assimilation, or, in such cases as the Jews of East London, they remained, of their own choice, segregated in easily distinguishable colonies. For we must remember that there is not one London, but very many, and that some are very much more English than are others. You would not seek to study the English in Whitechapel or Soho. What is popularly called the "West End," overrun by wealthy foreigners or foreigners in search of wealth, capitalised and internationalised until it differs only in minor details from the luxury-quarter of any modern capital, is the most

un-English in character and atmosphere of all the Londons.

So when, coming home after years of exile, I went to look for the English, I was well-advised, as I think, to go to South London in search of them. I went thither in the first place almost by chance, because it happened that I was born in what is now a very overcrowded district in the Southern periphery, and I wished to see for myself the changes which had there taken place in forty years or so.

I found changes a-many, though fewer perhaps than in the baby that was born there. There is a little water-colour sketch, still existing and in my sister's possession, which was painted by my mother in the year of my birth. It shows the view from one of the back windows of the house, a prospect of rural Surrey such as nowadays you must go twenty miles further afield to find duplicated, cabbage fields and hedgerows and a wooded range of hills, with only one house in sight, which from its barns and outbuildings seems to be a farm, and that at half a mile's distance.

When I revisited the old house, ten years after the close of the European War, I found that it still stood, almost unchanged, save that its long front garden had been cut short to allow of road-widening, but there was not a hedgerow or a field and scarcely a tree worthy of the name anywhere around it; instead there were row upon row of little red villas stretching for mile upon undistinguishable mile beyond it towards the country.

I have always thought him a fool who seeks to com-

press even the smallest country within the limits of one book, and such a city as London is greater than many countries, and as complex and many sided. Even a section of it is by far too vast to be graspable by one human brain.

London south of the river alone is one of the largest cities in the world, with a population running to three millions and stretching for mile upon mile always further into what was the pleasant countryside of Kent and Surrey. They tell me that houses stretch in an unbroken line for fifteen miles from London Bridge without any break greater than a public garden —room enough to house the people of Australia.

But because every descent must some time come to level ground, and it would be over-conscientious to continue such division until we came to the one subject undeniably graspable by the human brain— one solitary human being—we may stop, I think, at my Borough, not indeed that in which I was born, but one not very far from it; a city of manageable size, containing among its people fewer extremes than do some of its sisters, as I hope to show, which has never had any very great foreign immigration to affect the constant age-long influx of young country men and women; a microcosm, as I take it, of all England.

Now, when we come to consider this Borough the first and quite the most important thing we must remember about it is that it is not at all the same Borough which sat where it now sits, fifty—or even twenty years—ago. And that less in its physical qualities—here the widening of a street, there the

pulling down of an old building; here the passing of a meadow, or there the birth of a playing field—than in the peopling of it. For the people of my Borough —the same is true, I think, of most of England—are different in very many ways from their fathers, mentally, spiritually, even physically. England lost—and gained—much from the Great War; it affected her more than any of her sister nations who shared in it, on either side. France and the French it wounded sorely, but left fundamentally unchanged; America it scarcely affected, save on the surface; Germany, externally changed is, I think, inwardly the old Germany—I do not mean the Germany as she was pictured to us during the War—but the true Germany which our grandfathers knew—and loved. But England suffered, and was, ten years after the Armistice, still suffering, a change—a peaceful revolution—reaching to the innermost depths of her being and so great that it can be compared only to the changes brought about by the Renaissance, when the Middle Ages gave place to the New Age. Whether this will be for better or for worse, we who are still living through it may not know; at least, the Borough of which I write is that which existed at the close of the first decade after the European War. Thirty years ago it was another people living in another setting; thirty years hence it may be another people living in another world; now it is in an Age of Transition akin to that which gave birth at once to Columbus and the Anabaptists.

What I saw during my stay in the Metropolitan

Borough I have called Romwell I have set down as I saw it. Mistakes in my observations and errors in my deductions from them are, I have no doubt, very many. At least I may claim the merit of fidelity, that neither by addition nor omission have I consciously falsified the picture of one London Borough and its people as they appeared to me.

CHAPTER THE SECOND

CINDERELLA BEYOND THE BRIDGES

One of the most uncomfortable nights I ever spent was on board an oil-tanker, bound from Vera Cruz to Tampico. A "norther," which is a particularly vicious kind of squall peculiar to the Gulf of Mexico, was blowing; there was no accommodation for passengers, so that half a dozen of us had to doze uncomfortably on lockers in the captain's cabin; worst of all, two of my companions in misfortune, an Englishman and an American, argued unceasingly over the contrasted advantages of London and New York.

Suddenly, a stentorian voice, belonging to the second officer, pontificated, in tones which drowned at once the howling of the gale and that of the disputants, "London and New York! There aren't no such places! Hold your mouths, both of you, before I show you how!"

That weary mariner spoke only out of the depth of his annoyance, unaware that he was, in fact, enunciating a very real truth. There are, indeed, no such cities as London or New York; they are as unreal as the rows of ciphers appended to a number with which such as Herr Einstein juggle so comfortably. For a city, like a human being, to be real, must have limitations, and it is not until you have dissected and

divided up the vastly inchoate idea that is London into smaller, more credible entities that it takes on reality. And London has at least the advantage over her shadowy sisters that she is not difficult of division into parts very differently featured. Taken at its broadest, the four cardinal divisions of North, East, South and West London are so unlike that a stranger, ignorant of their points of contact and cohesion, might well believe each a mother city of countries widely differing in character and power. Further, to most of their inhabitants the word " London " suggests only one of them and a small part at that. The Cockney may speak of, but he never thinks of, London as a whole. Unlike the Parisian, or to a lesser extent, the New Yorker, who really do, in differing degrees, long for their mother-cities when exiled from them, your Cockney can adapt himself easily to new conditions in which London soon ceases to be more than a vague memory. " London " is to him some quiet, unlovely street in Tufnell Park or, as in my own case, a small section of the Hammersmith Broadway.

Like most other men past their first youth who have led wandering lives, I have more than once had the opportunity of facing death more nearly than was pleasant. If I may be pardoned for introducing my own experiences I may recall an occasion when I was sentenced to death by a South American court martial and had some rather unpleasant moments before I was enlarged by the intervention of the British Minister. In the mixture of emotions inevitable on such occasions, I can very well remember recalling, not London

as London, but a certain quarter mile or so of that Western thoroughfare, with the scarlet omnibuses and the brown tramcars bisecting it and the pavements crowded with eager shoppers and ant-like crowds surging round the brightly coloured fruit barrows in the open-air market beside the theatre, and especially a little old man with a white beard and the bright, black eyes of a sparrow, from whom I used to buy children's penny picture-books, not because I needed them nor had any children to whom to give them, but because his eyes were so very bright and black and sparrow-like and spoke of a freedom not of the body. And as it was with me, I feel sure it has been with other men.

If, then, London as a whole is too vast to have any reality, that portion of it south of the Thames, formlessly great indeed, yet comes at least within measurable distance of the real. It is too large to be regarded as a city, with the comfortable meaning of a group of associated human beings ; it is at least small enough for certain of its broader features to be distinguishable. Or, again, it is possible to form some vague judgment of the details in which it varies from other similarly overgrown cities of its own standing.

Nothing is, of course, more tempting or less practicable than the drawing of comparisons. Especially is this true of cities, not only because beauty is in the eye of the beholder and each beholder of a city sees some different aspect of it, but because he can grasp only one salient feature and must perforce ignore the rest. Paris boasts herself and is usually accepted as the most beautiful of world capitals, on

the strength of the one magnificent vista that reaches from the Louvre to the Etoile. Add some fine boulevards, respectable avenues and noteworthy public buildings—making up all that the average visitor, or average Parisian for that matter, ever sees of her—and you have a sufficiently attractive picture. But if you remember also the sordid squalor of many streets beyond the charmed circle, the drab insanitary degradation of her working quarters, the almost incredible inchoateness of her suburbs, her average of beauty is not high. So we remember only the Prater or the Ringstrasse in Vienna, Riverside Drive in New York, with the unforgettable vista of the Palisades, Unter den Linden in Berlin. And on the strength of these few selected acres each world-city boasts of its supremacy of beauty, conveniently forgetting the horrid evidences of human incapacity which make up so vastly greater a part of it.

Thus, practically considered, there is not a capital in the world that can compare in its average of beauty or of dignity with, shall we say, an ant-hill, as we may if beauty has any kinship with efficiency. Nor could Herr Einstein himself, juggle with his figures as he might, reduce to any exactitude a comparison in actual beauty or splendour or, to coin a word, inhabitableness, between say, London, Paris and New York, with every advantage or defect exactly balanced.

It would seem easier to contrast different parts of the same city; there should be little difficulty in comparing Belleville with Passy, or Hamilton Fish Park with University Heights—though amid the rapid

changes entailed by modern conditions, the comparison may be but fugitive. But while Paris is one city, New York another, London is half a dozen.

In the matter of the several capitals that combine to form the whole "London" we reach more solid ground. Hertford Street, Mayfair, has little enough in common with a North Kensington rookery, though both are typical features of West London. But between the two world-cities that confront each other across the Thames it is perilous to draw comparisons. Both have their beauties—and their shames—unknown to each other if not even to themselves; only ignorance can condemn the one while it lauds, unknowing, the other. If the man from Walworth is silent about the glories of Henry VII.'s chapel, of which he has never heard; so you may be sure the clubman of Pall Mall, the dweller in a West Kensington maisonnette, knows little more of the view from the top of One Tree Hill, perhaps the most significantly beautiful in all the world.

Where a nice realisation of the difficulties leads some to hesitate, others less instructed may not fear the attempt. Shortly before I began this book a well-meaning Royal Duke delivered a speech in which he dwelt, appalled, upon the lack of beauty in South London. Especially was he eloquent upon the sordid monotony of its mean streets, its lack of noble public buildings; the drabness of its social atmosphere compared with the civic splendours of the Royal West. If he were wrong it was simply because he lacked, less the sense of proportion, than the data

upon which to base it. To one driving, with a preconceived idea, through the long streets of South London, they may seem drab enough, partly because they are expected so to seem, partly because the beauties of South London are of a less flaunting, standardised type than those of her western sister. South London is indeed the Cinderella of Cities—and unless you are sufficient of a connoisseur to realise what beauty means to the eyes of a South Londoner, you were better to confine your exploration to the more regular features of an Aldwych or a new Regent Street.

Let it be accepted, gratefully, that the civic Cinderella is content to be ignored, unknown, to the great ones of the earth, save for the purpose of drawing a fallacious moral. She can boast of no private palaces; foreign visitors know nothing of her; she has not even achieved the unhappy eminence of East London, happy hunting ground of the philanthropist, amateur or professional. She has so far escaped the speculative eye of Big Business; she has no Champs Elysées; she recks nothing of Great White Ways.

She has, on the other hand, her own advantages. She can boast avenues as fine, potentially, as any in Paris; finer, actually, than any in West London. The Clapham Road, Brixton Road, Kennington Road, or the Old Kent Road are not to be matched in London north of the River, save certainly by the Mile End Road, possibly by parts of the Oxford Street–Shepherd's Bush or Piccadilly–Hammersmith highways. She has her ring of parks and commons and open spaces. She has mansions as large as any in Mayfair;

it is true that each now houses a dozen families instead of one. She has palaces and prisons, workhouses and cathedrals, everything that goes to make up a mother city. But especially characteristic and in their significance, the real heart of the southern city are her homes—those innumerable streets of little houses that seem to the casual passer-by so drably depressing. Architecturally, it is true, there is little to be said for them, save that they are free from the fussy, often exasperating "ornament" of more pretentious districts.

Little grey boxes of grimy brick though they be, they yet come as near to the ideal of the real home, the safe retreat where a man can escape from the nerve-wearing tensions of life in public, as you can find in any great city. Philanthropists and social workers may wonder that the overcrowded thousands should prefer such little mean hovels to the splendours of great blocks of tenements, designed at a vast expense of money and of ingenuity to give all the modern comforts at less than economic rent, but any poor man, or man who has been poor, knows that the illogical instinct is logically sound. Once within your little brick box you are, as nowhere else in the world, a man, your own master, owing lip-service to none, with never a thought to be wasted on the oppressive whims of porters or superintendents or, most tiresome of all, social workers. Your front door once closed, though it may be but upon bare walls and a pallet, you come nearer to the ideal of the free citizen than the most pampered of your pruned and clipped-to-civilised-pattern block-dwelling neighbours.

Perhaps greatest of all the blessings of little Grey Brick Street is that to each of its little boxes is attached some little patch of land, some yard or garden, be it but of blanket size, open to the free heavens, that is—so long as you pay your rent—your very own. You may make a paradise of it, or a desert; in either case it is your kingdom. London may boast of her municipally ordered parks and open spaces—and I do not think, indeed, that their match is to be found anywhere else in the world—but the humblest little down-trodden yard where a man may, or may not, walk on the grass, if grass there be, at his own pleasure; where his children can play, as mischievously as they will, with never a thought of minatory notices or alert park-keepers, is, in its moral and spiritual influence in the building of free citizens, worth all the municipally-managed Edens that officialdom ever dreamed of.

Nor is the drabness of these humble thoroughfares inevitable. The dullest of them can be beautified by the apparition of one green tree, more valuable where it stands than a forest elsewhere. A coat of paint can work a miracle. I know of one such little street, within a stone's throw of my home in my Borough. It was for long an eyesore, repellent with grimy brick, blistered plaster, woodwork with streaks of dishevelled paint, just such a street as invites the sympathising condemnation of the philanthropist. (Though indeed I can remember one beauty spot even there: a window-box, carefully wired against predatory cats—and cubs—all ablaze with common scarlet geraniums, and gaining in glory from its drab

surroundings.) To the ears of the landlord of these unpromising homes one day some pitiful angel whispered—and he listened. Painters appeared with their ladders and white blouses. Within a week the little street was aglow with hope, within three it was radiant with achievement. The grey bricks were new pointed; the plaster glowed a cheerful yellow; the doors and window-sills and railings glistened in splendid green. The very window-panes shone in cleanly sympathy; aspidistras, more magnificent than I had ever dreamed of, spread their long leaves in each little bow-window between the neatly draped Nottingham-lace curtains. I should not have blenched at the thought of leading Mr. Peabody himself down Little Grey Brick Street and defying him to show me anywhere pleasanter little homes or better fitted to the needs of those who live in them. Alas that, "ideal homes" for one family apiece, they must house three or four! that the paint must fade again and the brickwork grow shabby and the little street relapse into its old-time drabness! For it is very well to build cottage colonies on the furthest outskirts of the Great City, and very desirable they are, and very well adapted to the needs of those who can afford the rents necessarily asked for them. But the little grey streets are nearer to a man's work—and to his heart—and could be made to blossom as fair as any Garden City, given but the gardener's loving care.

I am thinking of a garden set amid surroundings as unpromising as you need look for. It lies in a narrow alley-way of six old houses. You approach it from a

roaring main thoroughfare, through an archway beside a public house. The windows face the blank white-washed wall of a great brewery, so that the heady smell of malt is never far from your nostrils. The houses are low built, relics of an earlier day, when gardens and perhaps open fields stretched away behind them. Now they almost touch another row that backs upon them from behind. In front, between the doorposts and the brewery wall is a little forecourt that may be twenty feet across. On a summer day the sun streams down into it, deflected from the brewery wall, and that forecourt is a blaze of flowers: larkspurs and delphiniums, tall arum lilies and phloxes and roses—it is a foolish tale that roses will not grow in London. Bees cruise there, and the sky is blue overhead, and the traffic beyond the archway throbs dully, like waves beating on the rocks. Altogether that must be a fine mansion in the West that can show brighter gardens than can Leg-of-Mutton Yard.

South London is not only a separate metropolis, but one of a very marked individuality. And because, thanks to its protective reputation of drabness, it has not yet become—or had not in the decade following the European War—the prey of Big Business, it has greater potentialities than the other Londons. The work of standardisation which had turned the " West End " into a replica of all other fashionable quarters had not yet begun; Little Grey Brick Street might have its drawbacks—at least it had not its thousand counterparts in Lower Manhattan or Menilmontant. No crime had yet been committed that could compare

with the destruction of a stucco Regent Street that was as individual as it was ugly, to give place to a meaningless replica of Park Avenue or the Dorotheenstrasse. South London knew nothing so horrible as the monstrous ready-made factory block that had shot up where once Grosvenor House set the stamp of its quaint ugliness upon Park Lane, where it had grown, as a man grows, beautiful in its imperfections.

Her reputation, substantiated by the dreary prospects from the train windows as we approach London from the south, had its full share in preserving Cinderella's individuality. Foreign visitors seldom visited her; your tourist, after all, sees only what he is told to see, and for those without eyes there was very little to be seen south of the river, save indeed where here a railway station or there a County Hall had been laboriously scratched out of the edge, as near as may be to the vaunted west. You might gauge the completeness of this lack of foreign visitors from the lack of hotels. Except for those intended for business men who worked in the City, which partook more of the nature of boarding houses, and of course, of the innumerable licensed houses of one kind or another which called themselves " Hotels " for no very good reason, the Southern Cinderella was as bare of caravanserais as was her sister on the east.

Similarly, except on the extreme southern verge, where the city began to merge into the country—or what was left of it—there was an entire lack of " fashion." I have never been able to understand why, in the decade following the Great War, when the fashion arose of calling yourself the " New Poor,"

even though in many cases your income was unchanged, or even bettered, the fashionable world, when it abandoned its western palaces, did not cross the bridges and find in some of the fine old houses built for the wealthy merchants of a former age accommodation comparable to what they left at a cost comparatively inconsiderable. Instead, they preferred, with that gregariousness which links man with his more innocent brother the sheep, to crowd into uncomfortable little flats in one chosen district, there to reproduce, voluntarily, and to the amusement of the angels, those overcrowded conditions which were formerly the monopoly of their poorest fellow-citizens.

To the student in search of the English, this quaint convention had its advantages. Spared foreign patronage or fashionable condescension, Cinderella remained the most English of all the Londons. Some "foreign colonies" you might find, but few and inconsiderable compared to Whitechapel or Soho or Mayfair. For the rest, Cinderella South of the Bridges was, as she has always been, the melting-pot in which long generations of Dick Whittingtons, coming to seek their fortune where the streets are paved with gold, have stayed there and in staying helped to make up that blend of all the English which to-day sleeps in South London, pouring back as evening comes in one thick tide over the Bridges from their workshops to their homes.

Now, just as London is an Empire, and South London a nation, and just as a country is divided into its provinces, so are her Boroughs the Provinces of South London, and it was to one of them that I betook me to find some of the English.

CHAPTER THE THIRD

MY BOROUGH

ONCE upon a time some Romans were wandering about in a wood. Their ultimate object was to spread the Pax Romana, conquering or exterminating to that end whatever natives they might encounter, but for the time they had no immediate purpose save to spy out the land. They advanced carefully, mistrusting the apparent emptiness of the thick woods, whence at any moment a shower of missiles might fall upon them. Suddenly the trees died away before them, and they came out upon an open, grassy hill. It was the last outskirt of the hill-country through which they had adventured, and they hailed it thankfully as a point whence they could reconstruct their position.

Below the flat, rounded hill-top on which they stood lay stretched out before them a broad marshy valley, covered with reeds and water plants, with sluggish rivulets and oozy backwaters dissecting it, and beyond, a broad, slow river. Beyond the river again the ground rose more rapidly, covered with dense forest, to a range of hills, similar in height to those on which they stood, closing in the northern horizon. Between the further hills and the river were lesser eminences, one of which stood almost on the bank, while out of the river itself rose two or three reedy islets, forming

another, lower bank above tide-level. A keen-eyed centurion, shading his eyes from the watery sunshine, thought he could distinguish the huts of a settlement of some kind, perhaps of wandering fishermen, and that there were coracles in mid-stream.

Because the leader of the explorers, being a Roman, was gifted with commonsense, he camped where he stood, instead of leading his men down into a malarial mosquito-infested marsh, and thus it came about that the beginnings of all the Londons were not on Thames bank—for a group of nomadic fishermen's huts is negligible—but on a hill-top of what is now South London. Some will tell you that this first camp was half a dozen miles to the southward, in what is nowadays Surburbia, but they know little of the Romans who will believe that they preferred a tangled site in a trackless forest, where they would have been hard put to it to defend themselves against sudden attack, to an open hillside, commanding a wide outlook and with an open field of fire round it.

The Borough, which thus very probably includes the original site of London, I am going to call Romwell, though that is not its name, because, for one thing, I am not writing a gazetteer or a topical description, and may well wander beyond its limits, and for another, because I am going to mention a number of real people by names which are not their own, and do not wish too closely to identify them or their homes.

Romwell, though no more than a Metropolitan Borough, is larger than some capitals, having something over a quarter of a million indwellers, and like

any other city, it is governed by its own Mayor and Corporation. For the great Empire that is called London is a Federal Government, like the United States, with its Central Executive (seated unexpectedly enough, south of the River), which rules in such matters of common interest as police and education and hygiene, and its Federated States (or Boroughs) which care for more purely local needs, as the local highways, and the care of the poor and licensing. To make the analogy complete, the Federated Borough-States are each divided into Parishes, as the States into Counties, out of the union of which, older, units, they have been born.

This State of Romwell has its strongly outlined characteristics, differing from its sister Boroughs as does Tennessee, say, from Massachusetts. It is a true Democracy, for one thing—more so indeed than any American State which is familiar to me. While there are some rich—or moderately rich—and some poor—though few of the very poorest—there is an almost entire lack of the familiar classes or castes. I do not suppose you will find a man of title—except infrequent Knights of that most democratic of all Orders—the British Empire. There are few foreigners—for there is little to attract them—as few visitors from other Englands, and, as a consequence that I have already noted, few or no caste-proud hotels. Most significant of all, practically all the inhabitants of my Borough, as it seems to a stranger, speak the same language, or variant of a language, enjoy a similar standard of life, of culture and of education; share similar pleasures

and, under similar conditions, exhibit almost similar reactions. Which is not, of course, to say that they have not, like other Democracies, a caste system as hard cut as any that ruled at the late Imperial Court of Vienna ; the more honoured locally because its grades are indistinguishable to the outsider. Of all the changes that came over Romwell as a result of the Great War, I think this submergence of the old visible distinctions between classes and the emergence of new as distinct, though almost indistinguishable, were among the most significant.

Obedient to the aspiring nature of mankind, the more " eligible " residential parts of my Borough lie to the southward, on the slopes or summits of the hills which form its southern boundary. Very pleasant they have been—and in parts still are—actually the most eligible, in their potentialities of health and beauty, of all London, so that it is to be regretted that some unimaginative High Priest chose to build his Temple of Diana on the riverside and that the great ones of the land, headed by the Sovereign, preferred in consequence to settle in the dull marshy meadows which are now Belgravia and Mayfair. Nowadays, though many of the large old houses set up mostly at the beginning of the last century by rich merchants pining for purer air are still surrounded by their pleasant " grounds," few are held by one family, but are, instead, divided as " maisonnettes " between three or four or five. Others have been destroyed, and on the site of each has been set up, not one, but a dozen little red-brick villas, as ornate as the builder's estimates

would allow, and in many cases owned, though in few completely paid for, by the folk who live in them. They are supremely, depressingly ugly—viewed to the stranger's eye—for the most part; resembling like peas in a pod their twin sisters set up, to serve a similar need, two, ten or twenty miles further from the central hub. Like them, again, they testify to the subtle change that has come over the English since the Great War. Sorry substitutes as are their serried rows for the tree-studded parks and gardens they have supplanted, at least their social significance is encouraging, speaking as they do of comfort very much more widely distributed. For, even granted that the thickness of their walls is one red brick instead of five, that their probable natural duration is thirty years instead of three centuries, at least they stand for so many dreams come true or coming.

Over the hills, coming from the southward and cutting almost a straight line through the whole length of my Borough, is a great thoroughfare that, in Paris or New York would be a Boulevard of Victory or a Father-of-his-Country Avenue, so broad it is and, in its way, so stately, but is here more practically the Romwell Road. The roadway alone is of such width that motor buses and gigantic tramcars can mingle with other traffic with little congestion, even in these restless days, while for the greater part of its length this thoroughfare is but a central ribbon, especially as it drops down the hillside, between pleasant long fore-gardens of private houses, more than doubling the total width. In parts, unfor-

tunately, encroaching property owners had, when this book was written, already built over these gardens, as they were entitled to do legally, if not morally, forming terraces of shops and, if they are not prevented by some higher power than is to be found within the Borough, this tendency will no doubt increase as International Capital casts its inquiring eye south of the River. In the wiser days that are coming, such usurpations will no doubt be checked, the terraces in their turn torn down, and the garden space definitely added to the great avenue.

Where the road reaches level ground it bisects the commercial centre of the Borough. It is lined by the finest shops, especially about the market centre, as handsome and as choicely stocked as those of the most fashionable of the Londons. But these are not characteristic of it, however satisfactorily they may contribute towards the rates. Some at least of them are owned by great trusts, alien to the Borough and its inhabitants—the profits made by their owners are distributed among alien shareholders; they are indeed the first heralds of that inrush of alien—even though British—capital which, in time, will no doubt turn Romwell into a characterless replica of any other international business centre. At present, let us note thankfully in passing, there are still local tradesmen, knowing and catering for local tastes and needs, who stand up stoutly against these foreign overlords and make, all things considered, as fine a show as they.

As it advances riverwards, other wide avenues—

some still preserving their ribbon of garden breathing-space, others already overbuilt—branch off from the main thoroughfare, leading to different goals upon Thames' bank, forming an apt example of natural town planning, in that each had its origin in a definite need of those who used it, a point which may deserve remembrance from the designers of artificial town plans. They grow progressively drabber and less prosperous in suggestion as they near the river bank, and the space between them is filled in with those rows upon rows of the little grey brick houses that we know. Just as the whole system of All-the-Londons seems to some celestial observer from above as one dull grey scab upon the green earth, yet has, studied from a humbler eminence, its manifold incidents all differing from one another, so the drab streets of my Borough have their own distinguishing features, very evident to those who walk rather than ride through them. Let us, for instance, imitate a greater writer referring to a greater street and take a walk down Little Grey Brick Street.

It starts without any very evident reason out of the Romwell Road, at a point where there is a little public garden, nowadays composed of rather faded privet bushes behind rather menacing iron railings. It begins with half a dozen very ordinary grey brick boxlets, set back a few feet from the roadway behind moulting iron railings without a tuft of grass to hint at their original purpose. Before you have gone twenty yards it turns suddenly, at an obtuse angle, and the brick boxes have given place to little stucco-

faced cottages, each with an iron trellis outlining a front door that must be at least a century old. There is a thick lilac bush in front of one of them that juts out over the iron railings into the street, and in the next some hopeful tenant has planted a few marigold roots that, in time, have covered its whole small superficies with a golden glory.

Another hundred yards and you come to an older building that stands perhaps fifty feet back from the road, behind a plot with half a dozen squat lime trees growing upon it, giving it quite a rural suggestion, which, if you consult local histories, you will find it well deserves. In good King Charles' golden days, that is to say, it was a farm—you can trace the site of the old barns and outbuildings in the motor-assembling works behind it—and by the spot where we are now standing ran a little brook, long become a covered sewer, where the white ducks dabbled their orange bills and the meadowsweet rose above the banks.

Beyond the old farmhouse extends the tarred wall of a yard, once the rickyard, nowadays the workshop of a timber merchant; followed by another row of squat stucco-faced cottages, before one of which grows a tall plane tree, covering the street with its greenish-yellow shade. Set amid them is an ugly grey brick chapel with an absurd little spirelet, and at the corner, where a cross street joins two of the great thoroughfares, is a tall public house, very much the most imposing building in the street, though further on, hidden behind a long wall of new red brick, an immense block

of school buildings lurks within its asphalte playgrounds.

Were I a millionaire, with no better use for my money, I have often thought it would be a pleasant pastime to buy up Little Grey Brick Street or some even shabbier counterpart and set about making it agreeable. It would not cost much, as modern ideas go; to tear down some of the most hopeless of the little houses; to repair others; to engage a corps of gardeners and set them to work on beautifying the little front and back yards; to adapt at once the architecture and the purpose of the "Bricklayer's Arms"; to build a school less calculated to fill its small students' minds with visions of a prison; to convert the mournful little chapel into a gem of real Gothic stone, instead of the present sham Gothic brick; and, finally, to take one of the little cottages, perhaps the farm, with the motor workshop readapted as a garden, and there settle down to watch the effect of my improvements upon my neighbours. I have little doubt that they would co-operate with me to a man and woman, that between us Little Grey Brick Street would blossom like the rose and give a needed lesson to the other Londons in the provision of really "eligible" residential districts adapted to human needs. It is true that a very strict rule would have to be made—and enforced—that not more than one family should occupy one house, and that no lodgers be taken under any pretence whatever. And as this one necessary rule alone would be sufficient to ruin the scheme, by the protests it would arouse and

the unmerited hardship it would entail on the two or three hundred people I should be forced to evict—I fear Little Grey Brick Street is likely to remain as it is long after I have threaded its shabby length for the last time.

Even so, it is not nearly such a bad place as our betters would have it.

CHAPTER THE FOURTH

AN ENGLISH REVOLUTION

"AIN'T I the fairy?" cried Mrs. Wolsey, with an elephantine skip that made the walls tremble and brought down a shower of little grains of plaster from the crack in the ceiling which the heavy traffic had begun.

I suppose there is no reason, if human analogies obtain in Oberon's Kingdom, why there should not be substantial fairies as well as slim; in which case Mrs. Wolsey may have been right in her simile. Actually she was referring less to her figure than to a pair of flesh-coloured silk stockings she had honoured me by accepting on the occasion of Christmas, which showed to striking effect beneath her fashionably short skirt.

"Make some of them open their eyes at the Round House," she added in more restrained tones.

I first got to know Mrs. Wolsey through my friend, Mr. Harnett, who had rooms in the same house in Messiter Street. Her husband was, as she preferred to put it, "under the Council," being employed in some humble capacity about the stud of splendid horses maintained by the Borough Council to draw their dust carts. To supplement his modest income and to assist in paying for the roomful of furniture

they had acquired, on the "deferred payment" system, in the first flush of marital happiness, Mrs. Wolsey "obliged" ladies or gentlemen who, otherwise lacking domestic help, could yet afford her modest charges. She first obliged me when I was living in Mrs. Mellon's house, of whom you shall hear, and she obliged me so devotedly at a time of illness that we became friends, and thus it was that I was allowed to testify my gratitude with the pair of flesh-coloured silk stockings.

Physically Mrs. Wolsey was not at all characteristic of my Borough, for she was extremely tall and strongly built, though she had not yet reached the age when it is incumbent upon ladies of the neighbourhood to "put on flesh." Despite her heavy-footedness, she was a cheerful soul, with something of the frolicsomeness of a cart-horse colt. She exercised despotic but kindly control over her husband, who was perhaps half her size and still suffered from a nervous disability incurred during the Great War. He was her second husband, though she was, I gathered, under thirty, her first having been of less plastic material, in her own words, "one of the rorty ones," connected in some capacity with the Turf, and, as Theodore Hook said of his grandfather, "he disappeared about the time of the Assizes" and was seen no more. I have heard it hinted, by the scandalously minded, that Mrs. Wolsey's second marriage was bigamous in the eyes of the law, but under the somewhat confused conventions of matrimony which were then general in the district, this did not count against her socially, and

certainly it in no way detracted from her cheerfulness. That social ambitions she had you may judge when I tell you that, on the occasion of our second meeting, she confided to me, when telling me her name, that she was a direct descendant of a certain Cardinal of the same patronymic.

I had, as you see, sufficient reason for liking Mrs. Wolsey, but I shall always be especially grateful to her for having given me my first glimpse into the overwhelming revolution which had taken place in the social life of England, and more particularly in Romwell, as the direct result of the Great War, a revolution of a kind which, as far as my experience goes, was possible in England and nowhere else in the world. And if you are to understand anything of the meanings of English history, you must, I think, consider such a case as Mrs. Wolsey and her husband.

You will have noted that, in reference to her silk stockings she mentioned the " Round House." Later she explained to me that, it being a Saturday, when her husband finished his duties in the Council stables early in the afternoon, she was meeting him and two friends at the Round House in Piccadilly Circus, and they were all going on to see Eric Bottle and Greta Swansong in " Sundered Lives " at the Megatherium Talkiedrome.

Usually, and no doubt rightly, we are told that the English Revolution was primarily due to the redistribution of wealth brought about by the Great War and the resultant higher standard of living among the poorer classes of Englishmen. I should be inclined

to put its origins a good deal further back and to look for some of them under the humble roof of an eating house.

Men who were still young at the time of which I am writing could very well remember the eating houses devoted to the working class in the days before the War, stuffy, evil-smelling little shops, divided off into partitions, where cocoa, sausages and cooked meats were served, at appropriately small charges, under conditions approaching a savagery not inappropriate to their patrons, dirty-faced men in caps and mufflers, slow of speech, though quick of expletive, very Calibans of labour. If, now, you contrast such eating houses and such patrons with the huge and gaudy palaces dotted about London after the Great War, and the well—if not tastefully—dressed crowds who frequented them, you will get some idea of the change that has taken place, for they were the direct descendants of the frowsy eating houses of an earlier generation and their patrons of precisely the same class, in many cases actually the children or grandchildren of the earlier frequenters.

However much the overthrow of pre-existing ideas was due to the European War, I am not at all sure that as much was not to be credited to the clever business man—a true genius in his *métier*—who first realised that there was more profit to be made out of the infinity of poor men's ha'pennies than the few rich men's guineas. He it was, who—with his imitators—brought about the great change, and to him is very largely due the great amelioration, not only in the

tea-shop accommodation offered to the poorer classes, but in the clothing and consequently the manners of those who frequent them.

Nothing is more confusing to a foreigner, especially to one who, having read about them, has preconceived ideas about the English, than the rise of these tea-palaces and all that they imply. To them is due, incidentally, much of the misdirected foreign criticism which, comparing the "people" of post-war days with what is recorded of earlier generations, reads a marked degeneration in the national character. Not once, but many times, have I been asked by French and German friends how it came about that the English changed so much in so short a time. They would cite the legendary "English Milor," chivalrous, obstinate, polished, eccentric, self-possessed, imperturbable even to the point of death, never unmindful of his own dignity, the unquestioned "superior" in manner and mien under whatever circumstances. With him they would contrast the "Englishman" as he appears abroad to-day, very much to his disadvantage.

I hastened to reply, though on less certain knowledge than I have since acquired, that such criticisms *au fond* were unfair, in that they contrasted extremes, taking the most self-controlled and dignified "Milor" of past generations and comparing him with the most hysterical and least disciplined type of after-war England, and I told them that the drunken hooligan of Boulogne was not at all the successor of the dignified "Milor," but of those who, in his time, were

so submerged as to be altogether unregarded, as, for that matter, were the majority of the very much better-behaved and better-dressed crowds that thronged the dance halls and cheap restaurants, the tea-palaces and the Talkiedromes of post-war London. That "Milor" still existed, little changed from what was his father before him, but that few in numbers, as indeed he always was, he was today overlooked, lost in the vast crowds that, rising from what he once considered the gutter beneath him, now crowded the places that once were his, demanded a level of luxury thitherto unknown and, on the whole, were fundamentally better people than was he.

I sometimes wonder if those worshippers of the dead past who criticise so contemptuously the "English people" of today—from whom they themselves have sprung—would really prefer that the world should have stood still and that the clean, well-behaved patrons of the Round House should have changed not at all from what were their fathers and mothers; should still spend what little leisure was left from their crushing daily toil in polishing the walls of public houses with their backs, and why those who lament over the "decay of manners" cannot realise that there has been, on the contrary, an amazing improvement in manners, and that it is amazingly widespread, so that it has affected every class—except, indeed, the highest.

Although Mrs. Wolsey, self-elected descendant of a line of cardinals, having as such ambitions, preferred to take her husband "up West" and test the

glories of Piccadilly, do not forget that my Borough and its sisters, richer or poorer, could all alike duplicate those glories. They had their gilded eating houses and their Greatest Super-Super-Talkiedromes in the World; their citizens dressed, if not as well, at least more splendidly and in close imitation of Royal Duchesses; they also shared in the general redistribution of wealth and manners. Nay, they were perhaps in externals even more splendid than those of the other London. For it was a curious, perhaps an unhappy portent, resulting from the general *chassez-croisez*, that the more gorgeous a tea-house, or a theatre or a dress, the more "popular" it was and the more certain to be devoted to the service of the poorest. A perfectly plain dress might cost fifty guineas; an imitation of it, covered with tawdry decoration, could be bought, in hundreds, at thirty shillings. The more gilded a restaurant, the more certain you might be that its patrons came from, say, Romwell; if you wished to find the grandsons of your "Milor" you must seek for them in the simplest—true that it was also the most expensive—milieu.

Nor, it may be argued, was the general "vulgarity" which was so marked a feature of English post-war life altogether deplorable; inevitable it certainly was. "Vulgarity," after all, is the natural attribute of the crowd—and the crowd is but an assembling of the simple; of those little men who for the first time have found a place in the sunlight. The most obvious desire of a simple mind is for what it has never possessed, has never even dreamed of

possessing. It is natural that he who has always been condemned to eat between bare walls should dream of an infinity of gilding; that the woman who has for long generations been doomed to the simplest of dresses should, given the opportunity, sate herself with finery; that those who have so long been forced to restraint of manner and humility of speech should revel in self-assertion when the chance comes to them. They must indeed go through such a phase before they can be taught to follow those others who, preceding them along the same path some generations earlier, have learned that in restraint is seemliness, that beauty lies in the absence of the superfluous. As well condemn the emancipation of women because of the unfortunate extremes to which some women have been driven in seeking to emphasise their new-given freedom, as refuse to recognise the benefits the New Order has brought with it because of some temporary vulgarisation of the nation's life that grates upon those who have learned their lesson earlier.

The first fruits of the revolution as displayed in Romwell were not altogether admirable. Apart from the general lack of discipline, the widespread recognition of work as a curse unjustly inflicted upon the sons of Adam, the too-frequent ignoring of such minor virtues as thrift and veracity, that "higher standard of living" from which so much had been hoped—and indeed was still to be—found its greatest expression in a rage for superfluities. This not alone in matters of eating and drinking, of fine clothes and

similar familiar, if thitherto unobtainable luxuries, but of new—and not very needful needs—thitherto altogether undreamed of. In the house in which I lodged, for example, at the time Mrs. Mellon was my landlady, there were four other sets of lodgers, all of them people with small and hardly earned incomes—if I may include under such a label two families who existed not unhappily on Unemployed Insurance benefits. I doubt if any one of the married couples had or had ever had more than £4 a week of income; yet every one of them had a gramophone and two had wireless loud-speakers. The noise on a Sunday morning, when all the rooms, mostly with their doors wide open, such being the local convention, simultaneously belched forth cacophonic memories of the jungle, had to be heard to be believed. I am bound to add that I was the only person in the house who found anything unusual or disturbing in this concourse of sounds. Indeed, meeting Mrs. Mellon in the entrance passage on one occasion, I found her listening entranced, and she cried to me in passing, "I *do* love music. Always have, from a child so high."

I do not know if any of the gramophones were fully paid for, though I think it doubtful. I know, for I was told by their owners, that the two motor cycles, one of them owned by an unemployed youth, had been obtained on the hire system; so had the radio sets and the ornaments and the smarter attire of the ladies, designed for public appearances at the Round House or the Talkiedromes.

I have been told by those more familiar than myself with the course of post-war domestic politics in England that the multiplication of "Social services" by the State was designed to avert, and in fact averted, a threatened revolution. Were this so, that revolution may have been diverted along more peaceful channels than it would otherwise have followed; its ultimate results were no less far-reaching, and, whatever its original causes, immediate or future course, the English Revolution of the Twentieth Century will be recorded in history as in most respects unique and such as would scarcely have been possible in any other country.

No greater tribute is indeed possible to the instinctive political genius of the English than the course of this, perhaps the greatest, as it has been the most peaceful revolution in history. Elsewhere revolution has meant hatred, counter-oppression, bloodshed; only in England did the lower class—or what was formerly so considered—quietly, and even kindly, push aside its middle-class rulers, just as they in an earlier day thrust aside the aristocracy; peacefully and gently it possessed itself, not only of a higher standard of living as expressed in gramophones or motor bicycles, but for good or ill, of actual place and power. Without the shedding of a drop of blood, without injustice or oppression, without one word more bitter than is flung, even in the most stagnant days, by one political party against another, the great change was perfected until, within a decade after that change began to be visible, England had become a new nation

ruled by a New Order and far upon the road to newer changes still unseen. Think, as I have said to my American and French friends, think of the course of events in Russia, where people of similar estimation in their rulers' eyes undertook a similar task, and then sneer, if you will, at the Cockney tripper abroad, because his cloth cap is brighter in hue than good taste allows, or his manners less refined than those of the one-time paragon, the English gentleman. And when they have asked me how such a bloodless revolution has been possible in a world where force is still the final arbiter, I have said to them, because the fathers of the English were neither slaves nor princes.

All this time Mrs. Wolsey in her best cloche hat, her silk stockings, and her highest-heeled shoes, is on her way to meet her husband and her friends at the Round House in Piccadilly Circus, and it is time we returned to Romwell.

CHAPTER THE FIFTH

OTHER PEOPLE'S HOUSES

Mrs. Thwaites came out to where I was sitting, waiting, in the garden. She was dressed ceremoniously and in one gloved hand she bore one of the brown-paper carriers which Thomas's, the big grocers in the High Road, provide for those of their more favoured customers who have several parcels to carry at once. From it protruded, decently veiled, the neck and shoulders of a bottle.

When I say that she was dressed ceremoniously, you are to know that she boasted of being conservative in her attire. Therefore she was wearing a black silk dolman—I believe that is the technical name for it—a black felt hat, adorned with a shining arrow of imitation diamonds, quite as bright as real ones and a good deal larger, and her black kid gloves. Incidentally her skirts were longer than those usually affected by her contemporaries, though short enough to disclose that her legs were a good deal stouter than they used to be and to give perhaps unnecessary prominence to her stockings.

I liked Mrs. Thwaites from the first moment I saw her, and the longer I knew her the more I liked her, and in future, whenever I think of my Borough, it will be pleasantly represented in my mind, as might be

Athens by the figure of Minerva, by her stout figure, her golden hair and her cheerful smile. And, indeed, I do not know where you could have found another more representative, both in her strengths and her weaknesses, and for that matter, in her numbers, of the Borough in which she lived, so that Avon Parade, on a Saturday evening, when the shopping fever was at its height, was packed with her from end to end.

Mrs. Thwaites was born in a village near Canterbury some half a century ago, to err on the politer side. She left her birthplace in early childhood, and I do not think she had ever revisited it, but she told you still, with pride, that she was a Fair Maid of Kent. *En passant*, I incline to think that one of the most striking portents of life in the Borough was that nearly everyone nearing or arriving at middle life was born somewhere else, and that none ever thought of returning to their birthplace if they could possibly avoid it. The Frenchman's passionate love for his *pays* as contrasted with his *patrie* was strikingly absent, and I can imagine no worse sentence you could have passed upon Mrs. Thwaites than to order her to return to her "place of origin" and settle there. Whether or no this implies that London is a kindlier stepmother than Paris, at least it is a fact to be reckoned with. One result of the coming of motor transport had been to draw out long lines of little bungalows and villas along the great arterial roads between the big cities, but their one reason for existence was that they were not "the country"—the motor 'bus brought them within easy reach of the City, and the more

populated they became, the more popular also. For, be it remembered, what to some seems formidable overcrowding is to others—certainly to the majority of those who dwell in Romwell—at once the normal and the desirable condition. As soon assure a sardine that the life solitary is preferable to swimming in a shoal, as Mrs. Thwaites that a lonely farmhouse is comparable in comfort to five families in a house.

Like other famous cities, Romwell is seated on the banks of a river—a very little river, it is true. It is called the Avon—witness Avon Parade, one of our shopping centres—and long years ago it used to come sparkling down the hillsides in bright little falls to lose itself in the marsh that stretched below them. As the centuries passed, and the farmhouse that was Gundred the Saxon's grew into a hamlet, called Gundredstone from the boundary marks set up by the old thegn, and the hamlet grew to a village that covered the hillside and stretched out beside the highway across the marsh towards the Thames, the little river itself was embanked, as the marshes themselves were peopled, to make in the end its independent way to the greater river. In those days it ran at the bottom of the garden that was later Mrs. Thwaites', and no doubt the children of the big house fished in it for sticklebacks, and young lovers wandered through the green meadows on its further banks.

The little river still runs, though you would find it hard to trace its course, for it had in my time become a closed sewer, and all day long trams and motor 'buses roared above it, and the great house that was

once a wealthy merchant's housed six families, with Mrs. Thwaites as governess, and of the garden that once covered a flower-clad acre, half had been cut away and a row of little dingy grey brick houses stood doubtfully upon it, though what remained was still the pleasantest of oases, as you shall hear.

I suppose nothing was more characteristic of the Borough and its growth—unless it were Mrs. Thwaites herself—than this great house and the road in which it stood. At one time, not a century ago, it was the most peaceful of country lanes, as you can judge for yourself from an old print they show in the Free Library. Tall hedges and taller trees enclosed it, and a narrow rivulet of path stretched between banks of grass. It meandered down the hillside, and when it reached the great road that led south from the bridge, turned almost at right angles just between hill and what once was marsh, but then lush meadows. It was called in those distant days Love Lane, and very apt it must have been for the lovers of the two rustic hamlets between which it dawdled.

But at last it caught the eye of one Barnard, a merchant prince of London City, seeking rural repose not too far removed from his warehouse. He built himself a great house on the Avon banks, and as the years passed others followed his example, and, as surer footing was needed for their gig-horses, the lane was straightened and metalled into a highway, and, because its old name was lacking in dignity as a home for such serious men, and might indeed put unwelcome ideas into the heads of their secluded daughters, Love Lane

gave way to Barnard's Grove, after the first settler, and Barnard's Grove it is to-day, despite external improbabilities.

Even in the memories of those of us who were young soldiers in the Great War, Barnard's Grove was a pleasant and almost a rural road, its tall houses standing back behind taller trees that almost met across the roadway, and its brick walls giving glimpses of bright flower beds within. But already, long before we were born, all the marshes were thickly built upon, and row upon row of little houses surged around the spacious dwellings of the older time, and one by one the rich merchants took flight, seeking for deeper peace beyond the hills, though there were still meadow land and groves and pleasant footpaths within strolling distance.

Faster and faster surged on the thickening streets, and more and more precipitate was the flight of the comfortably circumstanced, until when I discovered it, Barnard's Grove resembled in almost everything its newer, meaner neighbours. The trees that shaded the roadway had gone ; the great shady gardens had been built on, save for two or three. Some of the big houses had given way to rows of grey brick cottages ; others had suffered an ignoble change to garages or workshops. Few remained at all suggestive of the great past, and they were doomed, and by their forlorn, out-of-elbows neglect seemed too well aware of it. Opposite Mrs. Thwaites' stood one, the largest in the street, which within three years suffered the change from private mansion to lodging house and from

lodging house to repair depot for motor lorries. The ample front garden was debased into a bare yard where were the wrecks of old lorries, as old, at least in suggestion, as the house itself, and even that was only transient, for the fiat had gone forth that the street was to be further widened, and one by one the last of the old houses gave way to rows of shops and that of Mrs. Thwaites along with them.

For the moment the Thwaites mansion, as we might call it in America, confronted its fate unmoved, unless indeed it showed some slackening of moral fibre in its neglect of paint and plaster. It still stood in dignified seclusion behind an ancient cedar, very ragged of stem and made raggeder by the straws wreathed about its shrunken branches by nesting sparrows. Behind it still stretched its goodly garden. Within it had lost nothing of its air of comfortable leisurely ease. There was a low square hall, in itself as large as many a mansion flat in Manhattan, that gave directly on the garden, so that it swam in summertime in a soft green light. There was a wide staircase, down which half a dozen people could walk abreast and the rooms—fifteen or twenty of them, for I never explored them all—were quite immense, by modern standards, with great curving bow windows, overlooking what was once the terrace, and wide fireplaces with solemn marble mantles. Six families, if we include Mrs. Thwaites and her daughter, who shared what was once the dining-room and did so very cosily, as I can testify, lived in the mansion. Some had one room and some had two, and the aristocrat of the

community no less than three. They were on the whole a cheerful baker's dozen (I cannot swear to one or two), though a shade mistrustful of one another and the ladies standing a little on ceremony, as ladies will. Also Mrs. Thwaites, kindliest of despots, did not encourage intimacy between her house-mates, holding—as I think correctly—that it led to gossiping, potent cause of ruined communities.

It was a unique feature of my Borough that so few of its inhabitants but lived in other people's houses. In such a case as the old house in Barnard's Grove, it was natural enough, for today no one but a plutocrat could afford to monopolise it—and there were few plutocrats in Romwell. But from the largest down to the smallest it was the same ; I doubt if there was one house in twenty in all the Borough but was divided up between several families, while in the poorest parts, those nearest to the Thames, the old painful joke about " a family in each corner and one in the middle of the floor " came perilously near to real earnest. There the passer-by might exercise his wits in estimating the number of families in each house from the different pattern of the curtains to the several windows.

In many cases the " lodger " was a connection by blood or marriage, a workmate or " chum " of the husband or wife, and as thus accepted as one of the family, in a relation altogether different to that in which her guests stood towards Mrs. Thwaites. In such cases the family ideal was less interfered with and the small additional income a welcome extension to the family budget. Again, as more and more houses

were being built out towards the country, or by the "development" of old estates, elbow room within the Borough did slowly but surely increase. Thus, in the year in which I am writing, the official figures showed that the population had definitely lessened, though only by some three or four thousand, greatly to the indignation of unimaginative Councillors, who declared themselves appalled at the publication of what was, in fact, an encouraging piece of news. So much justification they had indeed that the decrease was, inevitably, in the better-off part of the inhabitants. For the new houses, whether built by Councils or private enterprise were, in most cases, too expensive for the poorest and therefore most overcrowded class. Actually the better-off—those of the municipal servant, city clerk or small professional class—who had formerly rented two or three rooms in Mrs. Thwaites' house, moved out into the new villas, thus achieving the long-cherished ambition of "having a home of your own." Their place was taken by those who had formerly lodged in the poorer neighbouring streets, and now perhaps achieved their lesser ambition of having two rooms for a family instead of one. They again were succeeded by former dwellers in the poorest districts, which did accordingly tend, though all too slowly, to become less overcrowded.

I had it on the authority of Mrs. Thwaites herself that the palmiest days of lodging-letting in her quarter of my Borough were over even then. Just after the European War, and for four or five years later, her difficulty was only to choose between a multitude of

eligible applicants, all of them but too ready to settle down, perhaps for years, in the refuge against homelessness that she offered them. Gradually conditions worsened, from her point of view, so that, five years later, she had once seven of her rooms vacant at one time. Applicants began to ask questions about "service," an almost forgotten institution which had never before troubled her, and, as she mournfully informed me, their class had deteriorated to the point that most of them were no class at all. Which, however unfortunate for Mrs. Thwaites was, I think, a good sign socially regarded.

To return now to where she is awaiting us in the garden of her house. We had arranged to pay a little visit of some urgency together in the neighbourhood of Barnard's Grove, a visit of the more interest to me that it was in its details so eminently characteristic both of Mrs. Thwaites and of certain very widespread details in the life of the Borough.

It so happened that I had shortly before our visit come into contact with a man who served during the Great War in a regiment with which I was myself connected. When I saw him, he was standing at a street corner, offering little home-made wooden toys for sale, carved with a penknife out of match boxes, and showing a certain ingenuity that caught my eye in passing. He was a decent-looking fellow enough, though ragged and unshaven; he was wearing three war ribbons and the badge of the regiment to which I have referred. Also he was suffering from a hacking cough, so that he could scarcely reply to my questions;

a cough as to the genuine deadliness of which there could be no question at all.

Speaking as one with a fairly wide knowledge of the world, I can say without hesitation that the folk of Romwell are among the kindliest and the most charitable of any, which may explain why it was so often chosen as a hunting-ground by people in the last stages of poverty. Beggars they were not, for they always offered something, if no more than a box of matches, in exchange for your assistance—it is true that the law of the land enforced this; frauds you could not call them, for they were undoubtedly in the direst need. Deserving they may not have been any more than the rest of us. The chief objection to be found to them lay in their numbers and the fact that, however deserving or the reverse, they had no claim upon the people of Romwell.

At the time of which I write, the country at large was suffering from widespread and, as it began to seem, permanent unemployment, the figures running into the million. Romwell was not really among the suffering districts, which were chiefly in the industrial North and Midlands. Unemployment there was in the Borough enough to cause serious uneasiness, but it was mostly of those who were, for one or other reason, unfit—or unwilling—rather than unfortunate, the aged, the diseased and, more particularly, those who had " been in trouble."

It is not easy for the outsider to realise the terrible significance of those simple words, to have " been in trouble," or, as some prefer to put it, to have " made

a mistake," in such a district as Romwell, and at a time when work was so hard to find even for those with unimpeachable records. But when the man with the wooden toys told me, quite simply, that he had made a mistake, I realised that he was probably very hopeless indeed. He had been, by trade, a grocer's assistant, and before the war—when he was little more than a child—he had done well enough. He had done well enough in the war, too, and, as he told me, between coughs, with a touch of reminiscent pride, he won his stripe on the Somme. His employers, more loyal than some, kept his place open for him; he had no complaints to make, no excuses to offer. Perhaps, though he did not suggest it, the war unsettled him. Some years later he developed a taste for gambling, gambled with money that was not his own, repented, was forgiven, fell again—and there was an end of him.

I knew, from the way he spoke of his "stripe," that there was hope for him yet, if his physical health permitted it, so I consulted with Mrs. Thwaites and a room was found for him and a doctor, and Mrs. Thwaites set herself, with the indomitable energy of her kind, when they are really interested—and only then—to find some employment for him that should not necessitate hanging about street corners in all weathers. She found it and told me about it, and it was to tell him about it that she came down to fetch me in the garden in her dress of ceremony and with the veiled bottle standing up out of the paper container.

I always found Mrs. Thwaites unexpected, so I was not really surprised when she told me that the position was that of "boy" to Mr. Burgess, the manager of the "off-licence" at the corner of Grange Street. Mr. Burgess drove a comfortable trade in the sweetest and fieriest of Empire wines, in bottled beers and, declinedingly, in spirits of one kind or another—declining because of their high cost and the cheapness of the Empire produce—and he was, I think, a prosperous man. But, like everyone else in my Borough, he had a permanent grievance—the dishonesty of the rising generation of errand boys. How far the post-war errand boy was more dishonest than his father is not for me to say. Mr. Burgess had no doubt of it, attributing it to the too great leniency of the law, buttressed upon the slackness of parents. Not only had the parents—and for that matter the school teachers, he would insist—given up any pretence of punishing their children for sins of omission or commission; the First Offender's Act had given public ground for the belief that every man or boy was entitled to one theft—as a dog is said to be entitled to one bite—without punishment or reproof. Accordingly—again I quote Mr. Burgess—of a long succession of errand boys, he could only remember two whom he had not dismissed for theft, not troubling to prosecute them, for he knew it useless to make police complaint against them. It occurred to me, though I did not like to suggest it, for Mr. Burgess disliked being contradicted, that some part of the dishonesty might occur because one of his errand boy's

duties was to collect money for the goods left at customers' houses, accounting for it at the close of his round—for it was no part of Mr. Burgess' theory of business to give credit, even to the most respected of his clients.

It was then to Mr. Burgess that Mrs. Thwaites applied, in the first instance, in her search for employment for Sergeant Curle. Although he very frankly told us that he had never risen above the grade of Lance-Corporal, Mrs. Thwaites always gave him the higher rank—and indeed persuaded me to do the like—because, as she said, it did him good to hear it. Curiously enough, I believe she was right and that the polite convention did really do him good spiritually, though not, unfortunately, physically. Whether Mr. Burgess really thought that he might be less disappointing, as a confessed ex-thief, than any potentially—though improbably—honest errand boy, or whether, as is more likely, his somewhat gruff exterior concealed the tender heart characteristic of the men of Romwell, he readily agreed to give him a trial as soon as he should be well enough for it, and, as arrhes sent him the gift of the bottle—of the most sugary, fiery Imperial wine anywhere to be found for any money.

This being happily arranged and some of his friends having made up a little fund, to be distributed by Mr. Burgess under a vow of secrecy, in supplement of the scant wages allotted to the post until such time as the Sergeant could " turn round " again, it was in the highest spirits that Mrs. Thwaites accompanied me to

Cassowarie Street, where the Sergeant was lodged, cataloguing as she went the contents of the paper carrier, intended as aids towards his housekeeping, and consisting of tins of salmon, extremely puffy pastry and other delicacies not, it seemed to me, altogether suitable for an invalid.

Cassowarie Street, which, turning at right angles out of Barnard's Grove, drove straight down the gentle descent to the marshland, was another example of the extent to which Romwell lived in other people's houses. Built a generation or so later than Little Grey Brick Street, it was infinitely more depressing. Its shabby little villas, each exactly resembling all its neighbours, down to the rosette on the gable and the conventional decoration of the bow window, dated from the time when the jerry-builder first realised the possibilities of cheap red brick. Intended originally for housing the badly paid clerks of the period, it gradually deteriorated from a " one-family " street to, daresay, a " six families." Number 14, originally called, as a faded inscription on the door detailed, " Keddleston Villa " had, at the time of our visit, a family in every one of its six rooms, averaging, I daresay, three persons to a family. Which did not prevent the presence of a flourishing aspidistra on a bamboo stand between half-drawn curtains of Nottingham lace in the bow window or, less visible from the street, a tall " wireless " pole in the back yard.

The front door was, as usual, open; two lady tenants were gossiping over the narrow rail that divided it from next door and four small children

were making mud pies in the tiny patch of bare front yard. We passed at once along the narrow entrance hall, its walls shiny with the rubbing of generations of elbows, and so into the little back room on the ground floor that was the refuge of Sergeant Curle.

It was not a very nice room, really, although the Sergeant had expressed real contentment at having again a Home of his Own after an eternity of doss houses and Embankment seats. It was very small, with one window, that looked down a narrow yard formed by projections of the houses and was used as playground by the children of both. At least there was a bed in which it was possible to rest, drawn across the window to give room for other simple articles of furniture, and immediately outside the window on one side was a tall lilac bush that cast a pleasant green shade into the room. As we entered the raucous scraping of a cheap gramophone in an upper storey filled the air, but it had not disturbed the Sergeant, for when, getting no reply to our knocking, we entered, he was lying on his back in uneasy sleep. I suppose he was dreaming of his Army days, probably the happiest in his harassed life, for there came muttered references to someone called " Fatty " and " the comp'ny orf'cer " and once, quite distinctly, though stopped by a burst of coughing, " *Course* we can hold them. What *d'you* think ? "

His was certainly a terrible cough, so that it seemed it must suffocate him there and then, and while I was praying for the doctor, who had arranged to meet us, the more practical Mrs. Thwaites opened the Imperial

Port with a resounding " plop " and set some of it to his lips in a teacup. It so far revived him that he realised he was not alone, and when Mrs. Thwaites adjured him as " Sergeant," to " drink this and you'll be as right as rain," he obeyed her, though I think he confused her with the company officer, for he called her " sir " before he wandered off again, to rejoin, in his dreams, his old battalion.

Next day, when again we called to meet the doctor, it was to find that he had not after all been as friendless as we thought. Someone Else had called in our absence and had found for Sergeant Curle a Home of his Own from which no one would ever again evict him.

CHAPTER THE SIXTH

THE "GREY MARE"

BEFORE I went to Barnard's Grove I stayed for a time in the house of Mrs. Mellon, in River Street. I left, after a few weeks, partly because I was, unfortunately, not musical, partly because I had, while living abroad, acquired a foreign prejudice in favour of a practicable bathroom. There was a bath at Mrs. Mellon's, but it was required for other than bathing purposes, being in the kitchen and used, habitually, as a storage place for the family coals. But although I no longer lived under her roof I remained on very friendly terms with Mrs. Mellon, and one day I received an invitation from her. It happened to be her birthday and I had sent her, as a memento, a little bottle of a peculiarly virulent perfume, purporting to have come from Paris, to which I knew that she was partial. In reply came her letter, suggesting that I should come to see her—but not in River Street, for the rooms were all full. "If you come to the new Saloon Lounge at the Grey Mare it is very select and nice I go there quite a lot every Sunday," said Mrs. Mellon's letter and, as you may suppose, I went there the following Sunday.

Were I attempting to catalogue the institutions of my Borough in the order of their importance, I should

place the " Grey Mare " very high upon the list, both particularly and generally. It was, I mean, quite the most important of the licensed houses in that part of my Borough in which most of my time was spent. There were, of course, others, each holding sway over its own district, as does a church over its parish. There was more than a surface resemblance between the two institutions, for while the " Grey Mare," the " Plume of Feathers," the " Lord Salisbury " or the " Royal Arms " had the size, the importance and—it is to be feared—very much more than the influence of the parish churches of those old parishes which today make up the Borough, they were surrounded by a multitude of smaller rivals, from the fully licensed house down to the humbler beer-houses, not to speak of the " off-licences," which may be taken as representing so many Trade Chapels of one or other persuasion.

The " Grey Mare," which we may take as fully representative of its kind, had a long history, dating back indeed as far in establishment as, and even farther in its housing than, the Parish Church of Saint Thomas the Divine, which nearly faced it a little along the High Road. It had been licensed, as Mr. Henderson, the licensee, told me with a wholesome pride, for well over four hundred years; it figured more than once in historic happenings, and especially as having once boasted a secret hiding place which sheltered, at different periods, personalities as various as Judge Jeffreys and Jerry Abershaw the Highwayman. It was, for a time, the starting place of a line of horse omni-

buses to the City, though the coming of the motor left it, as it were, stranded halfway between the present termini. Its name, however, like those of so many of its kind, figured—and no doubt still figures—as a stage fare ; if you wished to find a tenant for your vacant apartments, you mentioned in your advertisement in the local papers or, as was more usual, for economic reasons, in the little frames which small tradesmen let out in their windows, that they were near the " Grey Mare." It was the headquarters of half a dozen clubs and unions of one kind or another—cyclists, friendly, or trades union, who held in it both their business meetings and their banquets. Finally, it was the undoubted social centre of its district, so that you mentioned it as your " house of call " with a certain tone of pride such as none of its humbler rivals could command.

A century ago the " Grey Mare " was a low-browed, white-faced building, with double bow windows reaching to the roof. It stood back from the road behind a patch of open space in which was a long watering trough, a very tall sign-post and half a dozen taller poplars, in whose shade drowsed half a dozen waggon teams what time the teamsters refreshed themselves in the tap. Behind it were ranges of stables and outhouses ; all around it stretched the flat tree-lined cattle-haunted meadows ; up and down the high road facing it smart stage coaches on their way to the coast glittered continually through the dust clouds. All is changed to-day ; the meadows are gone and the poplar trees ; where were the stables rows of

little houses cluster thick ; only a garden large enough to hold a carefully tended bowling green recalls some memory of that drowsy past. Thrice the size of its predecessor, the post-war " Grey Mare " was all a-glitter with plate glass and gilding ; it had its billiard-room and its dining-room ; its Saloon Lounge could hold a couple of hundred loungers at one time and, as Mrs. Mellon has told you, it was very select and nice and conducted on lines of the strictest decorum, as became a family resort.

Interesting as was the " Grey Mare " as a social centre and otherwise, its chief interest to me lay less in its potentialities for good and evil than in its marked testimony to the change that had come over the popular habits in my Borough during the decade succeeding the war. That drunkenness had diminished was evident enough, though whether because of any change of popular sentiment or the vastly increased cost of drinking I cannot say ; at least there was very much less outward evidence of drink both absolutely and relatively. I imagine that the Borough had always been a more sober place than, for instance, the " West End " ; personally I never saw a tithe of the number of obviously drunken men or women even in its poorest districts—where, if anywhere, a man might be excused for getting drunk and forgetting his surroundings—as might be seen in the West End of London, in Paris, in Boulogne-sur-Mer, or, for that matter, in New York under Prohibition.

But the curious and, according to the point of view, the disturbing or the promising, fact was the

increase of drinking among women. Before the war, as some of us can very well remember, it was the exception, in Romwell as elsewhere, for a respectable woman to be seen in the bar of a public house ; even in districts where the least was thought of it, the proportion of women to men was almost infinitesimal. So much was this changed since the war that, on the evidence of my friend Mr. Henderson and the young women behind his bars, they served—especially during certain hours—actually more women customers than men.

I have said that this might be disturbing or well-omened according to the point of view. Were it a sign that, perhaps as one result of the " emancipation " of women, they had decided to show themselves more drunken than their brothers, it would be ill-omened enough. But, so far at least as Romwell and more particularly the clientele of the " Grey Mare " were concerned, I do not think this was the reason. Women, and especially middle-aged women, have always consumed alcohol in the Borough, though perhaps less than men. In the pre-war days, however, when it was still considered a disgraceful thing for a woman to be seen in a public-house bar, when again—and this is an important point—the bars were extremely dirty, ill-smelling and uncomfortable places, where the customer had to stand against the bar while he consumed his order and drink as fast as he could to make room for newcomers, most women patronised the " off-licence "—as many of them still do—buying their liquor by the bottle and consuming it in comfort

at home. This led to marked abuses in the way of drunkenness. Just as in the United States in pre-Prohibition days a sensible law in certain States provided that saloons be so arranged that drinkers were visible from the outside, so the increasing London habit of frequenting "Saloon Lounges" made the woman, who would have thought nothing of over-drinking herself at home, think twice ere she aroused the unfavourable comment of her neighbours by intoxicating herself publicly. Mrs. Mellon, for instance, who was the most respectable woman I ever knew, would certainly never have thought of such a thing. It is true that, as she confided to me with some pride: "The more I drink the more respectable I get." Mrs. Thwaites, tenant of a larger house and ruler of a less vagrant tenantry—and in this distinction you have much of the class system of my Borough—regarded it as beneath her dignity to be seen in a "public" and, as you have heard, obtained such alcoholic refreshment as she needed from Mr. Burgess' off-licence, decently veiled in the basket of one of his suspect errand boys, or when abroad, refreshed herself at Benyon's, the licence-holding confectioners.

It perhaps symbolises human progress in Romwell—and not in Romwell alone, for I have noticed it in half a hundred other cities—that the nearer you approach the hill-tops the more prosperous are the houses and the more socially ambitious those who live in them. Because Barnard's Grove was further up the southern hill boundary than was River Street, Mrs. Thwaites' house was larger and more imposing

than was Mrs. Mellon's, and similarly Mrs. Thwaites was larger and more imposing than was Mrs. Mellon herself—to the extent, I suppose, of three inches in height and six in girth. So it was socially, as you could judge from many subtle distinctions. Mrs. Mellon was proud to be numbered among the most welcome guests of the new Saloon Lounge; Mrs. Thwaites would never have allowed herself to be seen there. Mrs. Mellon treated the bus-conductor and the milkman as social equals; Mrs. Thwaites addressed them as "young man." Mrs. Mellon frankly pushed into the heart of the crowd; Mrs. Thwaites hovered as curiously but more haughtily upon the outskirts. Yet in their stout hearts, their high colour and their ample girth, their mental outlook and their unshakable prejudices, they were more nearly sisters than ever were the Colonel's lady and Judy O'Grady; so that had I been asked which more nearly typified the Borough I should have been hard put to it to answer.

When I kept tryst with Mrs. Mellon in the new Saloon Lounge of the "Grey Mare," it was to find her comfortably seated before a table in the shadow of a large artificial palm-tree in a copper pot. The actual bar, the mantelpiece and other salient points of the large room were fragrant with sweet peas, from the private garden of Mr. Henderson the licensee, as he would proudly inform all and sundry of his guests. Beyond Mrs. Mellon's table was an open door, through which came a glimpse of the shaven lawn and flower-beds of the "Tea Gardens and Bowling

Green." I found myself mentally comparing it with the room in which my poor friend, Sergeant Curle, had died so recently before and with ten thousand others like it in the Borough and wondering. . . .

With Mrs. Mellon were a number of friends, to whom she introduced me. They included Mr. Swain, the builder, her daughter Lettuce—so called, partly I think because the name had a certain aristocratic suggestion, but still more because Mrs. Mellon was particularly fond of a good salad—Charlie Wilson, who was, or aspired to be, engaged to Lettuce and was an omnibus conductor and, as it happened, a total abstainer, and three other ladies, whose names I have forgotten and remember them indeed only for their amazing stoutness.

I have been told—Mr. Henderson's cellarman George was one of my informants, who should speak with authority, while another was no less than Mrs. Mellon herself—that very much of the really surprising stoutness of many of the middle-aged ladies of the Borough was due to—Imperial Preference! At the time of which I write the import duty imposed on wines of Imperial origin was less than that on their foreign rivals. One result was a flood of cheap wines from the Colonies, sweet, fiery and, I suppose, alcoholic. They were called, in popular parlance, Port—though I believe they were not legally allowed so to be called. Portugal naturally bestirred herself not to lose one of her most profitable customers and reduced the prices of her own product, and the ladies of my Borough reaped the benefit. For you must

remember that not only is cheap port strong and sweet and " fruity," but even in the old days before the war it had the peculiar attraction that, for some reason unknown, it was considered a " teetotal " and thus a " Lady's " drink. I well remember in my own childhood the stir that was caused in my family when a peccant nursemaid was convicted of having taken me to a public house of the neighbourhood and to have regaled me, not unwilling, with a glass of port, and her indignant protests that it was a temperance drink and would not hurt a fly.

Perhaps because of some remnant of this superstition, perhaps because of its sweetness, " port " remained the " Lady's " drink in my Borough, where it quite took the leading place once held by gin or whisky, then unobtainable to modest purses in any but the very smallest quantities. It had also, I think, though I know not on what grounds, a reputation for gentility, so that many ladies, among them Mrs. Mellon and her friends, who were drinking it as I entered, would dislike to be seen with a glass of beer in their hands—(stout, by the way, did not come under the same ban, as being medicinal)—but had no such feeling regarding even the largest of " large best ports."

In justice to these large ladies of my Borough, I should add that, as far as my personal observation goes, the greater freedom of women's dress in general since the war had something to do with their surprising girth. Seeing, I suppose, no reason why they should not share the ease conquered by their daughters, they

adopted, especially in the summer months—the same fashion of perfectly loose dresses, making no pretence of confining the figure and reaching little below the knee. If the result was not altogether becoming, it had no doubt the greater merit of being comfortable.

When I arrived Mrs. Mellon and her party were discussing little Elbert, who was Mrs. Mellon's youngest and, as she explained with pride, a pretty pickle. Being only eight years of age, he was forbidden by the law to enter the "Grey Mare" or any other licensed house except to buy liquor in a sealed vessel for consumption off the premises. Accordingly he had not been allowed to accompany his mother to her party and had expressed his indignation by departing into the unknown with a "gang" of whom Mrs. Mellon feared and expected the worst. Naturally the talk soon shifted to the absurdity of the said law.

Although it is no part of the mere observer to criticise laws which may have an underlying cause to him invisible, the law under which children even in their mother's charge were debarred entry to licensed premises struck me at the time—it may have been repealed since I left the Borough—as one of the silliest experiments in "temperance" legislation I have yet encountered. I am not referring to its more obvious drawback that while their elders entered the children would be left in the street in all weathers, with considerable risk to their healths and even greater risks to their lives through wandering into the roadway in the track of passing motor-traffic. The objection—as stated by Mrs. Mellon—seemed to go deeper,

in that it was based on an assumption entirely arbitrary and enshrined a really odious compromise.

Either the consumption of alcohol is an offence, as was then held in the United States, or it is legal, as was the case in England. If it is an evil thing it should be prohibited.

In England, where at that time the law regarded the sale and consumption of alcohol as entirely permissible, it would have seemed the obvious thing to nullify the possible harmful effects as far as possible. And quite the best way to stop drunkenness seems to be to render public opinion unfavourable to it—as indeed was already the case—and to render the drunkard ashamed of his weakness. Short of establishing a class of Helots, which is impracticable, though not, it is to be feared, for lack of candidates, the most obvious way to ensure this would seem to be to make it difficult to become drunk except in the very presence of those whose opinion you value. Thus the best argument in favour of welcoming the frequenting of licensed houses by women—I am omitting any question of their " emancipation "—is that their menfolk will be less likely to " make beasts of themselves " in their presence, which applies no less to the women themselves. Even more so, it would seem, should the presence of their children restrain both sexes from getting drunk; indeed, a public house with a parking place for perambulators would come near to the ideal in that respect.

The late General Obregon, President of Mexico, some years before his tragic death, laid down for my

benefit certain elementary axioms on the promotion of temperance which I shall not soon forget and which, as it seems to me, might not be without their value as applied to my—and other—Boroughs. The immediate problem occupying the President's mind was that of the *pulquerias* or national drink shops in which the peon drinks himself into brutish unconsciousness with the deadly pulque, which is the curse of his country. The *pulquerias*—an effort to establish a reformed type organised by an American company was in progress when I was last in that country, but I have not heard with what success—were extremely dirty and insanitary, with no inducement to a man to do anything but drink until he could drink no more, very much indeed as were the majority of English public-houses before the war.

The President believed that, properly conducted, a *pulqueria* could be as great an instrument for national good as any other institution. (He was, perhaps I should say incidentally, a confirmed anti-clerical and engaged in a death struggle with the local clerical authorities.) Briefly to put it, he believed that you cannot induce a man to take interest in his own improvement by preaching at him, that you must make the upward path as pleasant as possible, and that he is much more likely to listen to your admonitions if they are addressed to him under comfortable conditions. If, to translate him into terms of my Borough, you added to the attractions of the " Grey Mare " a lecture hall, a picture gallery, a place for classic concerts, or even a theatre, in all of which Mr. and Mrs.

Mellon and their children could sip their glasses of " beer and Burton " or of " old crusted " while they looked or listened, the chances are that they would be less interested in the contents of their glasses than in what their eyes or ears told them. The vision of a university Don or, for that matter, of a minister of religion, delivering an address on, let us say, Natural History, the Flemish School of Painting, or Self-Sacrifice to a public-house audience, pipe in mouth, glass in hand, with noiseless waiters collecting their orders the while, may have its incongruities—and, of course, it is almost an insult to compare the citizens of London to mere Mexican peons—but all the same——

Mrs. Mellon and her friends, having finished their second, perhaps even, I fear, their third, glass of Empire wine, said goodbye and went peaceably homeward through the calm twilight of the summer Sunday.

CHAPTER THE SEVENTH

BROTHERS' KEEPERS

Pastor Blackwell was holding a Holiness campaign in his Gospel Tent on the waste land at the corner of Runciman Street. The meetings went on continuously from 10 in the morning until 10 at night, being conducted by relays of Pastors on the shift system. It was thus that, as I was going in to the six o'clock meeting, I met old Mr. Hobman coming out of the four o'clock and we had time to exchange a few words in passing.

Mr. Hobman is—or was, for he died only a few weeks later—one of the oldest men in my Borough. He claimed to ninety-seven years and was popularly credited with at least ninety, eighty or so of which had been spent in Runciman Street. He could remember and, as is less usual, describe the days when he was first bound apprentice to the saddlery business. It was even then carried on in the house where Mr. Hobman still lived, but in those days the little River Avon sparkled before the single row of houses squeezed in between its banks and the large private park of old Squite Murgatroyd, long since become a County Council possession and one of the prettiest "lungs" of all the Londons. Runciman Street, in those days called, according to Mr. Hobman, Mill

Lane, because of a water-mill which operated there, though destroyed and no more than a memory even in his time, was a little dependency of the great house, tenanted for the most part by its superannuated servants, and the saddlery shop was started by a long-retired coachman who, according to old Mr. Hobman, could remember having seen as a boy the captured Highlanders marched into London in the days of the "Forty-five." Old Mr. Hobman was entered as the older coachman's apprentice boy when he was only twelve, having been sent up from Devonshire for that purpose, and he had remained in the business ever since and seen as many changes as one man can expect to see in a lifetime. One thing only had never changed; the little shop remained just as it must have been when it nestled under tall elms on the water's edge and its long garden ran with the hedge of the home park. It was—and is—a low two-storeyed cottage, that has been stuccoed over and given an ugly slate roof instead of its former thatch, with a little window on either side of the door, through which, until the day of his death, you could see the old gentleman bending over his work-table in the little shop, in later years, it is to be feared, making only a pretence of being busied. The windows, which were always kept very bright, were indeed museums of a lost industry, for in them, cast down with little arrangement, were such old-time exhibits as saddles and headstalls, martingales and carter's whiplashes, faded diplomas recording successes at long-forgotten Agricultural Shows, and even more faded photo-

graphs showing Mr. Hobman in the pride of manhood controlling a noble coach team of Cleveland Bays that owed their splendid trappings to his care and industry.

I first became acquainted with old Mr. Hobman through the happy accident of having broken the leather thong of a favourite pair of braces and seeking his help in repairing them, and as we liked each other's looks from the first and found much to talk about, I was ere long admitted to the intimacy of his little parlour behind the shop, where he spent much of his time reading a large Bible, in which his ancestry for several generations was set out, and in condemning the changes which have come over the Borough since his youth.

Because of his Bible readings, I was not surprised to meet Mr. Hobman coming out of Pastor Blackwell's tent as I was going in, but because I knew that the Pastor was of a somewhat flowery school of eloquence, of the type which Mr. Hobman had frequently condemned to me as no better than "tub-thumpers," I was a little surprised to hear words of enthusiasm pour from his lips and the assurance that the reverend gentleman had the root of the matter in him to an extent old Mr. Hobman had not encountered for many a long day. I discovered the reason when I listened, in company of perhaps fifty ladies, old and young, and five old gentlemen, to the Pastor's flowing periods. He was a convinced and cheerful believer in the doctrine of Hell, in its most concrete form. He had in him the soul of an artist, and his pictures of red-hot demons with white-hot pitchforks and writhing

tails shovelling the Damned into the Gates of Hell came from his lips with an eager enthusiasm. Nor were they any less to the taste of his congregation, who received them as eagerly as though they had been the most thrilling reels of the local cinema and with as intelligent an understanding.

I attended morning service at the Parish Church of St. Thomas the Divine, opposite the "Grey Mare," on the following Sunday, less from any religious motive than to compare the proceedings and especially the doctrine expounded with those of the fiery Pastor. There was certainly a larger congregation, possibly a couple of hundred; it was of similar age, and the proceedings were altogether more decorous. The sermon was delivered by the Rector, Canon Bannerman, white-haired, though of little more than middle age, with a tired, patient face, in every line of him a scholar and a gentleman. His sermon, based on a text in the Epistle to the Corinthians, inculcated the need of personal holiness in matters of everyday life, and was everything that could be wished, alike in matter, in method and in delivery. It was so far actual that it quoted incidents of the life of the moment, as reported in the Press, referred to the League of Nations, the Treaty of Locarno and the Boy Scouts—or it may have been the Church Lads' Brigade—in terms of commendation, and closed with a neat comparison between the holiness needed in the individual and that which should be cultivated by Statesmen in international relations. It particularly impressed me in that it did not once refer, either directly or by implication, to Heaven or Hell,

either as concrete facts or allegories, any more than it did to a conflict concerning certain doctrinal points which was then raging in the Church of England. I can imagine no body of decent human beings, from Athenian ladies listening to an Epicurean philosopher in a rose garden to a Leaguer of the Guises hotly engaged in exterminating the local Huguenots, who might not have listened to it without offence—or, for that matter, with any great uplifting.

Later, sitting with old Mr. Hobman in his quiet little room behind the silent shop, I listened to his encomiums on the energetic Pastor and the somewhat bloodthirsty doctrine he was preaching. It was wonderful, Mr. Hobman considered, to hear so sound a doctrine so spiritedly put forward. He had not heard anything so comforting this fifty years, and it would be the salvation of England, already tottering on the brink of destruction, could it be universally accepted. I had never seen the old gentleman so animated, and, as he said, I believe it really had done him good to hear the possibilities of damnation so eloquently set out. As I listened, I found myself becoming always more convinced that old Mr. Hobman no more believed in a concrete, fiery Hell than did, let us say, the Rector of St. Thomas' himself. On the other hand, he considered it necessary, as a means of disciplining the disobedient—some horrid little boys had narrowly escaped breaking the shop-windows with a ball only a day or two before, while motor cyclists are notoriously the most undisciplined as they are the most deadly of creatures. Had there not been

a Hell, Mr. Hobman was quite sure it would have been necessary to invent it, as, for instance, one way of making the streets safe for elderly pedestrians. Yet I could not adduce one person, even among his most obvious dislikes, whom he considered to be in any danger of being consigned to that so necessary Hell by an All-Merciful Providence.

More people than old Mr. Hobman, I suspect, are in the habit of regarding a concrete and fiery Hell as among the first desiderata for a well-managed Universe, though I have met few who admitted it so openly; I met very many in my Borough, and out of it, on the other hand, who regarded the admittedly increasing neglect of religious observance as directly due to the growing agreement of preachers to accept, explain or deny it away. Others attributed it to a dozen other reasons, from the general slackness of discipline, parental and governmental, since the war, to this or to that. I do not think I mentioned the matter to anyone in the Borough, however openly irreligious themselves, who did not more or less regretfully bear witness to the main fact, that Christianity was losing its hold on the people of Romwell at an always faster rate.

Nor could one fail to be struck by the high average age of the local congregations. I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that the grey-haired were in the majority of three to one over younger worshippers; while of the latter by far the greater number were in the company of one or more elders. So, again, the women vastly outnumbered the men, young men

unaccompanied being practically entirely absent—except rather noticeably at Roman Catholic and Salvation Army services. With these two important exceptions, a pessimist might well have declared that organised Churchmanship had lost its appeal to any but a dwindling remnant of the older women.

Notwithstanding this, buildings devoted to religious denominations of one kind or another were second only to the public houses in numbers, with cinema halls a good third, and schools a long way behind. Nor was there any lack of religious effort, the more evident as the churches and chapels had by that time taken a leaf from the book of commerce and advertised their advantages on the walls and in the local Press at least as ardently as did the shop-keepers, and in similar ways. Usually they dwelt rather upon the material than the moral comforts they offered, as in such appeals as "A Warm Welcome. Good Music. A Friendly Atmosphere," or "Why Go Elsewhere? Church is the Place to spend a Happy Evening." Similarly the Churches showed a competitive spirit in their provision of Excursions, School Treats, even in some cases Whist Drives and Dances, which had no very evident connection with religious beliefs.

A stranger wandering through the streets of my Borough, especially upon a Sunday, might have deduced a very active religious life from the processions of one kind or another which lent colour to the streets; little boys dressed as scouts or soldiers, little girls dressed as decorously skirted sailors, bands—especially bands. There was one composed of very

serious little boys and girls with a very little girl as most energetic drum-major, which caused to me, at least, infinite joy upon occasion. In the local Press were frequent letters advocating religion from readers, suggesting a vast public interest in things spiritual and paralleling the efforts of the "national" dailies and weeklies, which, at the time, found useful aids to circulation in the reflexions of literary Deans or Bishops on how many of the tenets of Christianity it was necessary for a really cultivated cleric to believe, varied by interviews with popular murderesses detailing their stage ambitions.

That the English, wiser than their French neighbours, long since agreed to divorce religion from politics was clearly reflected in Romwell—the clergy being as varied in political as in religious faiths. The Rector of St. Thomas the Divine had no politics, publicly at least. One of his curates was an avowed and advanced Socialist; so was Pastor Jefferies; Mr. Whiteman, the pastor of a decrepit little chapel just round the corner from Mrs. Thwaites' house, was a leader of the local Liberals, and so on and so forth.

This all made for religious tolerance, an excellent thing when it does not culminate in indifference. The old hatred between Papist and Protestant might be dead for any public expression it found in the Borough. Perhaps, indeed, it was, as would not have been surprising in view of the fact that many of the Protestant churches—and those not the least energetic or well-filled—were decked out and their services conducted in a way almost indistinguishable from their Roman

rivals. Never did I even hear such attacks upon or vindications of the Roman Catholic Faith as were almost the daily bread of conversation in the little French city I know best.

Against this, it might be added—though only as the comment of an outsider—that all this parade of religious activity in so many and various shapes seemed to have little effect upon the ordinary people of the street. Of the many hundreds with whom I came in some sort of contact, I never met more than at the outside half a dozen—apart, of course, from those professionally interested—who, like old Mr. Hobman, showed any real interest in the forwarding either of Christianity in general or some sect in particular, and they were, without exception, of the older generation. I did not meet a dozen persons, under middle age, who were in the habit of regularly attending any sort of divine worship, or who displayed any interest whether the churches were full or empty, though I have met many filled with indignation that there were not more facilities for sport or amusement on Sundays. The most furiously active was a gentleman—he was, it is true, a bookmaker—who regarded the inertia of the Legislature on the question of allowing Sunday race-meetings as the nearest modern variant of the fires of Smithfield.

In fine, however zealous the workers, the harvest of their efforts seemed lower than in any other country I know, save perhaps Germany. The individual might be, and very often was, deeply interested in the future of his own soul; whether the Churches were

qualified to affect it, he seemed to have entirely lost both belief and interest. How much this may have to do with the rather unfortunate squabbling over doctrinal points which convulsed the State Church in the decade after the war, and the unedifying spectacle of Deans and Bishops abusing each other as fiercely as might so many politicians, I do not know—though I think not very much. I believe that more of it was due to the renunciation by the clergy of any claims to divine authority. For, if you threaten a man with damnation, it may affect his courage or conduct, should he believe that you have divine authority for the threat; if you insist in and out of season that you are only a man like himself, he will, if he is human—and the people of my Borough are extremely human—regard you as no fitter than himself to interpret the Infinite. That apocryphal story of Sidney Smith, who, when comparing the importance of a Bishop and a Judge, was reminded that the Bishop can say, "You be damned," but the Judge only "You be hanged," and retorted, "Yes—but if a Judge says 'You be hanged,' you *are* hanged," has its very direct application to the religious life of Romwell.

There is, I suppose, no Biblical text of which the truth is more evident everywhere in the Christian world today than "The blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church." Nowhere today could you find greater or more increasing faith than in Mexico, where, Church and State having come into acute conflict, the Church can adduce very cogent evidence of persecution and produce the bones of as many martyrs as may

be considered necessary. In Russia faith and fervour were brought to their apogee among the followers of the Orthodox Church by the atheistic persecution of the Bolshevist authorities. In contrast to which, the bitter disbelief of the majority of Frenchmen, political though it may have become, is fundamentally due to the crushing of all organised opposition to the State Church by Louis XIV. It would seem to follow that an indispensable preliminary to any real Christian revival among the people of Romwell would be some such threat against their freedom of belief as the attainment by one of the warring sects of such political preponderance as would allow it seriously to persecute its opponents, or the irruption of some entirely foreign, definitely anti-religious Power which should make of a professed belief in Christianity a reason for martyrdom. Apart from such joggings of the religious instinct, it is hard to see how the tenets of Christianity should have found many converts in an age which insisted so heavily upon its rights as to exclude any consideration of its duties.

Many minor reasons there were, no doubt, why Romwell appeared so indifferent to the almost frenzied appeals of its religious well-wishers. As one result of the social revolution, for instance, that form of well-meant blackmail scarcely existed which, in a former age and in smaller communities, forced the small shop-keeper and employé to profess a holiness he did not feel, under penalty of losing the patronage or employment of his superiors. Another, reflected in the pages of the popular Press, was the increased interest taken

in spiritualism, theosophy, black magic, voodooism and other non-Christian or frankly eccentric faiths, suggesting less that religious instinct was moribund than that, dissatisfied with the old channels through which it sought for expression, it was seeking others newer and more individual.

Fundamentally, I think, the yearning for a credible Devil, who could persecute the believer unjustly and, more satisfactorily, ensure damnation for his enemies, was responsible. For I could not fail to note that two of the older bodies were undoubtedly increasing both in the numbers of the converts and the enthusiasm of their flocks. They were, as I have already mentioned, the two which insisted most unswervingly upon a personal and actual Devil and a real and material place of physical punishment everlasting—the Roman Catholic Church and the Salvation Army. There is nothing for which poor human nature yearns so enduringly as the certainty of its own salvation, except the inevitable damnation of its enemies.

CHAPTER THE EIGHTH

"PALMAM QUI MERUIT . . .

I was still a hundred yards from the corner when I was aware of a sudden flashing of pink knees that resolved itself into Lettuce Mellon, hurrying so fast that she nearly collided with me. "Come on!" she cried in high excitement. "Hurry, or you'll be too late! She'll have passed in another minute." Without stopping for further explanations, she continued her headlong rush towards the High Road, other pink knees hurrying beside her as she ran.

I realised then that it was noontide, the hour when the Excelsior Motor Body and Varnish Works releases the hundred or so girls who form so important a part of its staff, and that Lettuce must be one of them, which I had not realised before. I always liked Lettuce, who indeed lived up to the spirit of the unusual spelling of her name, in that she was delightfully fresh, not to say a little green, and had a heart of gold. But because I like Lettuce, I saw no reason to hurry behind her to an unknown goal, remembering as I did that her facile enthusiasms were more easily aroused than mine. And as it happened, my slower pace brought me in sufficient time to the point of interest, indicated by a row of girls and older women lining the pavements at the cross roads, all gazing in

the one direction, while the policeman on point duty, assisted for the occasion by an extremely smart mounted colleague, was holding up the traffic with an air of official sternness very different from his usual good-natured *sans-gêne*.

Two minutes later there was a rustle of anticipation as a very splendid motor car, bearing the Royal cipher, came slowly along the High Road. In it was an elderly lady with a kindly smile, who bowed very graciously in acknowledgment of the shrill squeaks of loyalty and the waving of handkerchiefs which greeted her passage. In another minute the motor-car had passed out of sight, the loyal squeaks keeping up with it along the pavements; the policeman dropped his warning arm, the traffic surged forward, and Lettuce, her lips parted, a touch of colour in her usually pale cheeks, found time to notice me. "Isn't she lovely?" she cried ecstatically. An elderly woman beside her pointed the moral. "Ah—but don't she look tired, poor dear. Ah—an anxious time she's been having."

To one who has lived mostly in countries where the Head of the State may be respected, but is certainly not loved, there was something touching in the real affection in which the people of my Borough held their King and his Royal Family. True that at the time of which I write King George was slowly recovering from a very severe illness which had caught at the imagination of every housewife in the Borough who had ever nursed a sick husband; true, again, that throughout his reign he had shown himself one of

those men of a conscientious sincerity and honesty whom the English hold most highly in regard. But the real reverence in which he was held pointed to a deeper feeling than could be aroused by the mere personality of the Sovereign, to something which rises above mere circumstances and is as true a tribute to the subject as to the Ruler.

It has become the fashion, wherever Democracy nears its logical conclusion, to decry it, the " religion of the full stomach and the empty head," as an oppressive *pis aller* endurable only as an alternative to worse evils. For the English, whose boast has always been that they are superior to the limitations of logic, Illogical Democracy—a Royalist Republic made up of subjects who rule and rulers who are governed—has proved as satisfactory a form of government as need be looked for, short of the Autocratic Heaven to come. Romwell, with its local conditions not—or not necessarily—applicable to the other Londons, to the rest of England or, least of all, to the outside world—yet excellently exemplified this adherence to Things as They Are rather than as They Might Be.

Her people, little given to coherent and not at all to constructive thought, had yet an instinctive level-headedness which took its place. Largely of pure British stock, they had, as such, taken their full share in evolving the system under which they lived, gradually and without interruption or disruption. Having slowly progressed under the protecting wing of that Older London which was ever mindful of her privileges, Romwell never knew the sway of oppres-

sive overlords. Such irksome political or social gradations as existed were little by little worn away beneath the slow footsteps of evolution; all her people had attained much the same standard of culture, similar impulses and understanding of each other's impulses; they were, by long descent, a loyal and a kindly people, naturally amenable to reasonable control, when exercised by those they trusted and whose motives they respected. Thus was born that easily comprehensible paradox, that the members of the most illogically free Democracy the world had ever seen lined the roads in their hundreds to show their fealty to a Ruler whose shadow covered half the world.

To understand this unique phenomenon, those of alien blood or simpler ideals must, I think, remember that the Englishman of Romwell and her sister Boroughs is uniquely innocent of all knowledge of the wrongs that have for long centuries been the daily commonplaces of life in many Continental countries. Such Red Revolutions as have happened in France, in Russia, in Hungary, are perfectly incomprehensible to him. It may come natural enough to a half-civilised Slav or Mongol or Semite to hate the Teutonic overlord who has not only enslaved him, but, more unforgiveably, has endeavoured to civilise him along lines abhorrent to his every instinct. It is difficult for civilised man—and the English are, if anything, over-civilised, with the defects that word implies—to hate and continue hating himself as mirrored in men of his own breed who, a generation or so ago, sprang

from the same origins as himself, who, a generation or so hence, will very likely lose those possessions or that rank or privilege which he now envies and become no richer or more honoured than himself.

There was, and deservedly, real hatred between Frenchman and Frenchman before and during and after the Terror, but it was due, not only to very long-continued oppression of the Commons by the caste of nobles, but to the historic fact that those nobles claimed and honestly believed themselves to be of a purer clay than lesser men. Families which, once ennobled, remain always noble until the end of time may well expect the hatred of such as can never hope to join their privileged ranks. But in such a land as England, without a nobility of blood at all, such considerations could not apply. That a Peer's son is only a commoner like yourself, that his grandson may be a poor commoner and his great-grandson, with ill-luck, an agricultural labourer; that you, born in Little Grey Brick Street, Romwell, may, not at all impossibly, end your life as a Peer and a father of Peers, is a conception of caste which shows that if Providence did not personally interest itself in evolving the British Constitution, as many Englishmen believe, it at least entrusted the task to hands very well fitted to undertake it. I do not think that in all previous history is recorded such an event as actually happened during my stay in Romwell, that the eldest grandson of the Sovereign should be born a commoner, with no prouder title than the democratic "Mr." Be very sure that it was known, and its significance commented

upon, from end to end of Romwell. All of which serves to remind me of my respected and respectable acquaintance—it is not my fault that I am not privileged to call him friend—Sir Manual Peck, one of the most notable personalities of my Borough.

I have sometimes wondered whether George Washington might not, in the event, have deserved even better of his country if, instead of refusing the Royal title and preferring to remain First Gentleman of the Republic, he had assumed the Crown and its accompanying duties as Fountain of Honour. True that in his day every friend of Liberty, as then understood, regarded crowns and hereditary titular honours as representing unearned privilege and vested oppression, the Marquis de Lafayette being no doubt considered the honourable exception that proved the rule. But, had Washington and his colleagues realised that the conditions notorious in Europe at the time of the Declaration of Independence were not destined to endure, he might conceivably have found reason to modify his own views and those of his fellow signatories. For, to his prophetic eye, it might have seemed at least arguable that, dissevered from feudal and other oppressive privileges, a peerage would be a desirable alternative to, say, a slush fund.

Today, were some incredibly Radical Democrat to set forth a proposal that the people of the United States decide to institute a system of titular distinctions, to be conferred upon such as have done the State some service, I can imagine him putting forward some such arguments as the following. That, as in

the Old Testament labour is specifically referred to as a Curse, so humanity has always regarded it with misgiving, and that accordingly it has always been found necessary to give exceptional rewards for exceptional effort, either in the shape of money, of privilege, or of titular distinction. Privilege having become even as labour in the eyes of Democracy, titles being frowned upon as permanent reminders of that inequality which is so patent to the angels and so abhorrent to mankind, there remains, in the newer democracies, no other possible reward for exceptional ability than hard cash. Unfortunately, experience has shown that, where money is the one reward of ability, men are ready to throw aside all other considerations in their pursuit of it, with the result that corruption, both public and private, becomes a commonplace.

Here I can imagine my very imaginary Representative, if he has not already been shouted down, educing numberless instances at home and abroad from his own experience and those of his uneasy audience in proof of his contention. I can imagine him, quoting, for example, the case of Germany, where, in the days of the Empire, when a Fountain of Honour still survived, when titles of honour were still held in higher regard than cash, corruption in the admirably managed public services was almost unknown, while, since the Revolution and the reversal of the former pyramid, the contrary is deplorably the case. And he might, raising his voice to a scream, to dominate the opposing din, finally quote the case of England, an ancient monarchy where, even

today, the standard of public life is higher than in any new Republic, not, indeed, that instances of corruption both public and private might not be found—for even Englishmen are human—but that, unlike some communities in which it is winked at, ignored or actually condoned, in England the whole weight of public opinion is antagonistic to it and that public man, whether police constable or Prime Minister, convicted of it, becomes, *ipso facto*, an exile from public life or public honours.

Without following my Representative in his further arguments in favour of the resurrection of titular distinctions and whether they should or should not be made hereditary and his final peroration, in which he should point out that the only fault to be found with the peerage, as honoured in England, were that it is too limited and that no American Peerage would be worth considering unless it contained, for instance, some working bricklayer, raised to the baronage as recognition of the good life-work he has put into his bricklaying for no more than Trade Union rates of pay, I would ask you to consider the Order of the British Empire, a not contemptible substitute in the eyes of my Borough.

Ever since the day that Mr. Thackeray first chose as his model snobs certain middle-class Englishmen, it has been the custom to deride, or condemn, the English nation as a whole for what is called snobbishness. To them, we are told, there is a sanctity about a lord that compels their unthinking reverence; tuft-hunting and title-worship are national menaces; respect for a man who can boast of ancestry is as

harmful as it is absurd in a people many of whose most admirable representatives are their own ancestors. Such charges are largely based upon the frequency with which men of title have always been introduced into the works of fiction most popular among the middle class, themselves in most cases written by young women of the middle class, and upon the "social intelligence" dear to popular newspapers, also provided by young men of the middle class for middle-class readers. If they be true and if, being so, it be altogether deplorable, it is not for the mere chronicler to decide; at least I would venture to set forward my belief that snobbishness, so far as it exists in my Borough, is a very good thing indeed.

When you call an Englishman a snob it is, of course, only another way of saying that he is human—and the people of Romwell are very human, especially in their naive honouring of things that they believe to be good and their instinctive condemnation of things which, without having given much thought to the matter, they believe to be evil. Now, they incline to believe that a man bearing a title of honour should be good, respectworthy and apt for imitation, on the not very surprising assumption that had he been evil the title of honour would not have been bestowed upon him, a belief which is not so unreasonable as some would have it.

If, now, you believe that a Duke is a good man because he is a Duke and so far worthy of your imitation, you are going to imitate, not the Duke as he really is, but as you believe him to be, which is to say a good Duke. As such, he naturally embodies all

the virtues of a good man, whatever such may seem to your more or less reliable imaginings ; which is to say when, being an English snob, you laud and venerate him and, as far as lies within your limited facilities, set out to imitate him, you are imitating your ideal of what a good man should be. That I maintain is a very excellent thing and the fact that, for instance, a Duke may, in the flesh, be as apt to public corruption as the humblest of water-rate collectors, does not affect one whit the good influence which your ideal of him will have upon your character. Nor can even the argument of a good Republican that the only reason a Duke is likely to be less corrupt than, say a dustman, is because he is richer—with riches he has not earned—affect the question ; instead it only gives another reason for wishing to be as nearly modelled upon him as possible—for we also should like very much to be so rich, whether by inheritance or otherwise, that we should be above even the temptation of, let us say, accepting bribes.

Just, then, as snobbishness towards Dukes is, to my mind, a good thing, so, because there are very few Dukes and very many members of the Order of the British Empire, is reverence for the Order of the British Empire a better. Very few can ever hope to know a Duke on any terms of intimacy, to come near enough to model themselves upon his assumed virtues—which may be a good thing, so different is sometimes the real from the ideal. But even the humblest of us may very well know an M.B.E., may even be on terms of intimacy with him, may be per-

mitted in moments of privacy to slap him on the back, to note, for future reference, the pattern of his necktie, his manner of handling his knife and fork, those virtues, real or imaginary, which we descry in him and by the strict pursuit of which, we may take it, he has gained his titular eminence. And that is a very good thing indeed.

At the time of the institution of the Order of the British Empire—perhaps even now, for all I know to the contrary—it was the foolish custom to regard it with a certain jocular contempt, because, as was inevitable, it differed in so many respects from the accepted conception of Orders of Chivalry. Lavishly distributed at the close of the European War, conferred upon all sorts of men and women, from the humblest upwards, it seemed to the satirist to approach too nearly that Gilbertian Utopia in which—

> ". . . nobles, like the tradesmen, called
> For Orders every day."

It was again popularly supposed to be primarily intended as a reward for non-combatant War Work, and as such came to be associated with the rather dreadful portraits, published in the Illustrated Press during the Great War, of simpering ladies and pompous gentlemen, above the legend "Unwearied in War Work." It must be confessed that many of the peaceful Knights and Dames of the new Order had little in outward suggestion of the steel-cased, golden-spurred warriors suggested by the word Chivalry. Of these was Sir Manual Peck, Knight of the Most Respectable Order of the British Empire.

CHAPTER THE NINTH

. . . FERAT "

Sir Manual Peck—(as in the case of Lettuce Mellon, I disclaim all responsibility for the spelling of his Christian name, though I have heard that he was proud of it, as an ancient family inheritance)—Sir Manual, then, was very distinctly a man of peace, although his knighthood was a recognition of his War Work, carried out, not in the field, but in a Government Department responsible for providing beds and bedding for the fighting troops. For this he was well equipped, being in private life the proprietor—as later the Governing Director—of a chain of furniture shops, wide-flung throughout the suburbs and devoted mainly to providing furniture for the poorer classes on the hire-purchase system. He was not, however, the architect of his own fortunes, the business having been established by his father, a fine old gentleman who, at the time of which I speak, still took an active share in the management of the principal branch, established by himself many years previously—and was an honoured denizen of his son's home. He was, indeed, the more striking character of the two, the more so, perhaps, that he was always described by his family and their later circle of friends as "old-fashioned."

Here I may be allowed a digression to explain that in my Borough "old-fashioned" had a meaning I have not met with elsewhere, that of describing a person who drops his aitches. For one of the most notable external features of the English Revolution, as evident in Romwell, was certainly the changed local standard of English pronunciation. For more reasons than one, the result of the change was to crystallise the local forms of expression, so that with only minor variations they were common to all alike, from Sir Manual himself down to the humblest girl-worker in the Great Imperial Soap Works in Blessington Street.

The English, with that amused contempt with which they regard everything foreign to their own experience, smile complacently at what they call an "American" accent, ignorant that there are as many variants of classical English current in the United States as in England itself. Yet it may be doubted if one there were, from Vermont to New Mexico, as markedly unlike the language of Milton as that common in my Borough ten years after the European War. Consequent upon the example of the Council School Teacher, on the natural tendency of the lower ranks, during the war, to imitate or mimic the language of their officers, on the "broadcast" announcements, and on the popularity of "cross words" (a form of word puzzle which entailed frequent reference to a dictionary), the older Cockney tongue was forgotten, except by some of the older folk, just as the Cockney of Sam Weller had been for-

gotten by their grandfathers. Its place was taken by a serious caricature of what was called, for some reason, the Oxford accent—and was generally believed to be the professional language of the established clergy. It is for the philologist to analyse it; sufficient for me to record that its salient points were the over-emphasis of the letter " H "—except in moments of emotional stress, when it would disappear altogether—a tendency to reduce all the vowel sounds to one monotonous " ĕh," with the exception of " ā " which became " āĭ," a paradoxically drawled clipping of the final syllable, intended, like the " āĭ " to indicate refinement and—again as a result of " cross words "—a determined choice of the longer of two words expressing a similar meaning. I may quote as an example my friend Mr. Andrews, whom I have heard more than once say, " Eh wehs mehdehtaitehn' abeht eht." It is true that he was at the time under the influence of Miss Parsons.

Naturally enough, considering their greater social ambitions, the chief adherents of the new, as against the " old-fashioned " tongue were the younger women, especially those whose employment brought them in contact with the public. Some such, in public libraries, post offices, or tea-shops, became at times almost unintelligible to the plain man they intended to impress. The younger men, especially when in the throes of courtship, were little behind them, the more noticeably as they were the less certain of themselves. Also, having a natural leaning towards the use of expletives, which they must hold in check in deference

to the prejudices of their young lady, they were somewhat at a disadvantage.

The older women with whom I came in contact wavered between the two extremes, according, as I think, to the age and occupation of their daughters; the older men, with few exceptions, preferred to remain "old-fashioned."

One of the good results of an otherwise rather monotonous gentility—or snobbishness, as the censorious critic would have it—was the increasing disuse of expletives which I have noticed. The English, if we regard bad language as an art, have never been among its leaders, relying upon the reiteration of one or two hackneyed and almost meaningless words, as compared with the fine flow of obscene fancy indulged in by the Latins. The more popular of them being too realistic even for the modern young woman of the leisured class, their use had not, accordingly, penetrated, as was usual with other fashions, to the young women of my Borough, who still frowned upon them. They were largely confined to the "old-fashioned" or those who, from political or other ambitions, desired to show themselves different to their fellows. Except as incidental to a bout of fisticuffs or scratching between older members of the almost extinct "cap and muffler" caste, I heard, during my stay in the Borough, less bad language, and that more monotonous and less effective than in almost any other part of the world familiar to me.

How long the "Borough English" of the period was likely to endure was a speculation towards the

solution of which the household of Sir Manual Peck provided some interesting data. While old Mr. Peck was determinedly old-fashioned, speaking the Cockney of the days of Albert Chevalier with evident relish, his son, who had been educated at a local Board School, was definitely of post-war Romwell. Lady Peck might be described as the uncertain quantity in the equation. Before his accession to the ranks of the titled aristocracy, Sir Manual's greatest pride in life, socially speaking, was, I have been told, that his wife before her marriage was a Gudgeon. I do not know who were the Gudgeons, or in what their social eminence consisted; so eminent were they that, although they may have receded a little into the background when "Moddom" became "M'Laidy" to the shop assistants, to the end of his life, among its greatest elements of happiness to Sir Manual will certainly be that Lady Peck was once a Gudgeon.

When she was still a Gudgeon I have no doubt the Dame spoke the language of the educated Englishwoman, but in the twenty years or so of her married life she had inevitably added to it something of the local variant amid which her lot was cast, and thus stood linguistically mid-way between her husband and her two children. They, being pupils, the boy at one of the greater public schools, the girl at a fashionable feminine equivalent, spoke the tongue of their immediate environment, which in some ways, allowing for the difference in intonation, approximated to that spoken by, for instance, Lettuce Mellon, thus going far to complete the circle.

In yet other ways the inhabitants of Warblingham Hall, Sir Manual's residence in Upper Barnard's Grove, symbolised the evolution of my Borough. The Knight, perhaps wisely realising that it were better to be first in Romwell than near the tail-end of another London, remained in the house where his honours came to him, proof, if others had been lacking, that his elevation had not spoiled him. Save for his title and his occupancy of an entire house, set in an attractive garden, he differed little, except in minor details, from the generality of his fellow Boroughmen. It is true that he—or more probably his wife—developed a preference for "late dinner" as contrasted with "high tea," that he became a shade more pompous in his manner and, most particularly, that he showed an increasing kindliness not only towards his immediate dependents, but in his dealings with his fellow men.

There was a time, I have been told, when the firm of Peck was regarded as harsh in its interpretation of the terms of its hire-purchase agreements. If an unhappy purchaser, as was not infrequent, defaulted even in the payment of his last instalment, he was liable to see the furniture, of the value of which he had already paid perhaps eleven-twelfths, summarily seized and carried off, leaving him no hope of redress, nor could the most pathetic appeals soften the stony hearts of the vendors.

Some little time before I left Romwell it befell me to make a similar appeal, on behalf of a young couple similarly circumstanced, to Sir Manual in person. And

here let me say, lest I seem to boast of a greater knowledge of the Knight and his antecedents than so slight an acquaintance warrants, that much of what I am telling you is on the authority of Mrs. Wolsey, who was privileged to afford extra domestic help, when it was needed, at Warblingham Hall. If it be objected that the tittle-tattle of the servants' hall is notoriously unreliable, I would reply that it is suspect only when it is malicious, whereas Mrs. Wolsey had nothing but praise and kindly feeling for her employer and was as such reliable.

I called, then, upon Sir Manual at his office in his principal Establishment, somewhat oppressed with the difficulty of my errand, to find him, far from resembling the Shylock I had expected, a human, kindly and understanding man, showing no more condescension than was proper from a member of the titled aristocracy towards a needy commoner, and he acceded to my request with only sufficient hesitation to mark the due value of the benefit he was conferring.

I am content to be told, by the sceptic, that this change, if change there actually were, in the trading methods of the Messrs. Peck was due to anything but the Governing Director's public honours ; that it was merely a case of a kindlier son modifying the attitude of a sterner father ; that increasing competition in the cheap furniture trade made such concessions necessary ; that the cunning Sir Manual realised that one such act of munificence trumpeted abroad would act as an excellent and inexpensive advertisement. All this may be true, or partly true ; as against

which I may chronicle other changes in Sir Manual's apparent character. Thus, from being devoted only to his business, shortly after his elevation he became a public man, taking a warm interest in the affairs of Romwell, a frequent deliverer of speeches upon topics of local or national interest, when he appeared, you may be sure, in a smartly cut full dress of ceremony, displaying the insignia of his rank. He gave considerable sums to worthy causes. From a nonenity with the reputation of a rather ruthless man of business, he had become a man noted for his benefactions to his native Borough and, as such, a good example to the rest of us. It may be that this was so to speak a mere dressing of the shop-window, cunningly calculated to increase his business and its profits, but that is after all a minor detail. The important fact is, that in the eyes of his contemporaries, Sir Manual was a better and a kindlier and a more respect-worthy man than was mere Mr. Manual Peck; that lesser men given, with the imitativeness of poor humanity, to ape the qualities of the successful, which is to say of their "betters," would be led to better things if they followed the example of the Knight rather than those of the mere furniture dealer, and that such being, as I think it, the case, my imaginary Representative, pleading for titular honours before an irresponsive Assembly, might find in Sir Manual Peck another little arrow for his quiver.

Unfortunately, from the point of view of my Borough, the success of Sir Manual meant, I fear, no permanent benefit to Romwell. Thitherto, being to

some degree a man of independent character, greatly influenced by the old father he honoured above all men, backed by a sensible wife, he remained a man of Romwell, and as such a turret of its strength. But already—*pace* Mrs. Wolsey—there was a talk of a move to more congenial surroundings. His children, perhaps not unnaturally, had no love for the Borough. Their school friends, perhaps also their schoolmasters, regarded it with unconcealed contempt; that a civilised person should live there, they had been taught, was proof either of poverty or of a humble origin. The daughter especially, though still in her teens, was already in open revolt. If her father would not leave such sordid surroundings she threatened to abandon her home and set up a bachelor life in some place where she would not be cut off from human surroundings. So far her parents had stood out; Sir Manual, pottering about his garden in a shabby sweater, would not hear of any change. Old Mr. Peck would, he felt and declared, die as a result of any such rude transplanting. Also Romwell had done well by him; it behoved him to do his best for Romwell, now that honour had come to him.

Lady Peck still did her own shopping in the High Road, though her purchases were delivered by the eager shopkeepers and she no longer carried them home in a string bag. But, as Mrs. Wolsey believed, already the fond mother was half-conquered by the protests of her adored daughter; already the chief buttress of Sir Manual's defences was sapped. A little time, the death of Mr. Peck, who was already past the

allotted span, some immediate excuse for which the family waited, and the inevitable move would be made. The Peck family, no longer a Romwell landmark, would be indistinguishably lost in the dazzling brilliance of South Kensington or Belgravia and, a generation or so hence, those who are fortunate enough to be acquainted with the then Viscount, will learn respectfully that he descends from the ancient Saxon family of Peycke of Peyckenhame, Co. Worcs., and has not, nor ever had, any knowledge of a dreadful place called Romwell.

Many things have gone to the building up of the British Empire ; it seems to me that what is generally condemned as snobbishness is not the least among them.

CHAPTER THE TENTH

POWERS THAT WILL NOT BE

"ONE of them Reds, Bert is! Chances to one he carries a knife!"

Miss Parsons, who was not very large, gave a little squeak of delighted anticipation, glanced at her escorts, one of whom I had the honour to be, with a certain complacency, for we were both above the average size, and settled down luxuriously on the hard bench to await events.

It was not only that I was interested—the possibility of bloodshed is always interesting—I was filled with reminiscent interest also, for only a few years previously I had heard similar words, though in a foreign tongue, emphasised by just such an excited feminine squeak on what might or might not prove to have been a similar occasion. That was in the drawing-room of a very pleasant villa on a height overlooking the Danube at Buda-Pesth, and the occasion a secret meeting of extremely nervous bourgeois, met together to consider means for overthrowing the Communist *régime* at that time in power.

On this later occasion I had been invited by Mr. Andrews to accompany him to a "social evening" of the political club of which he was a member. Mr. Andrews was the assistant manager of my local branch

of Universal Egg and Butter Distribution, Ltd., and I first made his acquaintance over a matter of bad eggs. Two of my weekly half-dozen turned out less than doubtful and I took them back to the shop for exchange, not too hopefully. Mr. Andrews readily exchanged them for me and showed himself so knowledgable about the commodities he vended, from their first origins until the moment they left his hands, that I was more than a little impressed, such keenness being, in my experience, unusual in young men holding similar posts in the Borough. Though I have long lost sight of him, I have no doubt that he in due time secured a position better befitting his abilities.

His invitation to accompany him to the "social" not only marked a stage of progress in our intimacy; it was an occasion of importance in other directions also. To take them in order of importance: I was to be introduced to Miss Parsons, with whom Mr. Andrews was walking out, a distinguished politician of somewhat advanced views was to deliver an address on some political subject which I have forgotten, and was to be followed by dancing. To make possible a large attendance, it was timed for Sunday afternoon, and was to take place in the large hall attached to the club premises, formerly a Dissenting Chapel, rechristened, I don't know why, Lenin Hall.

Mr. Andrews very kindly promised to call for me, for which I had reason to be grateful, for, happening to see him and the splendour of his dress from my front window I was able to remove the cherry-coloured tie I had donned, as presumed compliment to my

host's opinions, and to resume my usual inconspicuous attire. Mr. Andrews I suspected of being politically a waverer; as was the case of most of the people of the Borough, I could never discover in him any real interest in politics. Miss Parsons, as he had told me, with a tender pride, was an extremist, next door to a Red, and it was in deference to her promptings that he had himself become a member of the Ibis Club. I had still to learn that a Red in my Borough was a very different person to a Red of Moscow or of the Place d'Italie.

Miss Parsons—her self-chosen Christian name, which I was never privileged to use, was Sonia, excellent thermometer of her social aspirations—met us at the entrance door of the hall and hurried us to our seats with a stern importance that marked her high position in the club counsels. I cannot say that she was altogether unexpected; one of the striking features of life in my Borough was that people were so much more true to type than elsewhere. Whether this was due to the ever-increasing democratisation of England, to some such economic cause as the greater suitability of certain types for certain employments, or to some other reason I do not know. When told that you are about to be introduced to a murderer in Mexico, to a Communist leader in Hungary or even to a professor in France, you remain, until the moment, in agreeable uncertainty as to what type of man you are going to meet; in my Borough it was, as I have proved a score of times, easy to guess in advance and to be not far out. Accordingly, having been told

beforehand by Mr. Andrews, with very natural pride, that Miss Parsons was employed in a local Post Office, I was not surprised to find her a short young lady, with cropped ash-colour hair, eyes of pale blue, a high-bridged nose, wearing rimless pince-nez and suffering very palpably from adenoids. Her manners were unusually refined, even for my Borough, with traces of that hauteur usual in the smaller bureaucracy of every country, though diminished on social occasions to an affable condescension. All this I had expected; it had not occurred to me that she would be, as she informed me within the first few minutes of our acquaintance, a member of the intelligentsia.

My paths in life having led in other directions, I have had few opportunities of mingling with the intelligentsia of any country, least of all with those of my Borough. I imagine, however, that Miss Parsons was excellently representative of them. As I gathered then and later, she subscribed to a leading circulating library, which provided her with the newest fiction at the earliest possible moment; she was an earnest student of the arts and sciences as set out in the cheaper periodical Press; her political views, described by herself as advanced, were somewhat vague, and dependent upon personalities rather than principles. That she talked a good deal about herself, and was, on the whole, more interested in her own emotions than in world movements was no more than natural to her age and sex.

Altogether I was not, at first, favourably impressed by Miss Parsons, and I was inclined to be sorry for the

devoted Mr. Andrews; nor was I convinced of my mistake until the occasion I am about to relate, which drew out of her that squeak of rapture that makes the whole feminine world kin.

The occasion of the meeting being partly social and partly political, the overt cause was the address by the distinguished politician, the tacit that the younger members might make the acquaintance of those of the other sex and indulge in dancing to the music of a gramophone. It was not well attended; the club secretary explained to me that, it being summer-time and the evenings at their longest, many of the members were detained by tennis engagements in the neighbouring public parks, though, as he hopefully added, they would turn up later. They were well advised, for at the last moment news arrived that the distinguished politician was also detained, doubtless on more serious business, and that his place would be taken by a member of the club committee whose speeches, I gathered from the general murmurs of disappointment, were considered less attractive. Also, I learned, there was something of a crisis in the affairs of the club owing to the intransigeance of a small but active section, described as "Reds," though I think only on general principles, for Miss Parsons was one of them, who having made a semi-successful bid for supremacy in the club counsels, were understood to be meditating steps abhorrent to older and more conservative members.

But the real thrill of the evening proved to have no connection with politics. While the more faithful,

perhaps ten in number, had adjourned to a smaller ante-room to listen to the political gospel of their committee-man, the majority remained in the larger hall to dance. Scarcely had the melancholy procession started—of all forms of amusement, the dance, as then practised publicly in my Borough, was the most melancholy—than Drama followed in its train. Miss Parsons, having solemnly paraded the room on the arm of Mr. Andrews, decided to sit out the second dance, for the purpose of giving me a short essay on the less-advanced elements of biology. Sudden sounds of dispute arose from the other end of the room. The faithful gramophone continued to squeak out its syncopated melody, but the revolving dancers slowly came to rest around the spot where the high words were rising and from two voices the *Brouhaha* increased to twenty, while one young lady, thrilled to her very nerve-centres, hurried across the empty floor to entreat another, who was sitting close beside me on the long bench that fringed the wall, to come at once. Then it was that, thrilled out of all memories of refinement, she uttered the words I have quoted at the head of this chapter; then that Miss Parsons by one squeak of rapture showed herself a woman and a sister.

The actual cause of strife was in no way political, being the eternal triangle of the loves of two young men, one pale and heavily bespectacled, the other paler and pimpled, for one young woman, who, out of justifiable coquetry, had given to the bespectacled suitor a dance she had previously promised to his

pimply rival. No knives were actually drawn, much, I think, to the disappointment of all the ladies, certainly of Miss Parsons, nor was there violence of any kind save indeed of language. Everybody talked, argued, gave advice, a number of subsidiary arguments started in corners; finally, at long length, at the behest of a white-bearded gentleman with a shiny crown of extraordinary respectability, the original disputants remembered that they were men and Englishmen and shook hands a little sheepishly. But if you could have seen the change which had come over the whole spirit of the "social," the vivacity of conversation, the energy of the dancers; if you could have heard the enthusiasm with which Miss Parsons, when I bade adieu to her and her enamoured escort at the door of the hall, declared that she could not remember any occasion she had enjoyed so much—you would have understood the relative importance of love and statesmanship in the hearts and heads of Romwell.

Ever since politics were invented there has been constant complaint, from those interested in them or their results, of the deplorable lack of interest shown by their neighbours. To the zealot, those who are not for him are against him, and to one such, whatever his brand of belief, the spectacle presented by my Borough towards the close of the third decade of the twentieth century must have been deplorable enough. A sprinkling of enthusiasts there were, of this, that, or the other party, struggling desperately to interest, in whatever way and by whatever means, their inert

brethren, but, to all appearances, hopelessly failing. Exhortation, appeal, prophecy of disaster, visions of a new earth under a new heaven, to all alike the good folk of Romwell listened amiably, and took of them no notice whatever. Elections, general or municipal, failed to arouse them; decreasing percentages of voters went, unwilling, to the polling booths; the adroitest "spell-binder" was received with the same amiable incredulity as was the most inarticulate; the general feeling was that elections were bad for business —or, more generally, for pleasure—and the sooner they were over and out of the way the better for everyone.

I have heard many explanations of this apathy, both in my Borough and elsewhere; that honest men were tired of the dishonesty, financial or ethical, of politicians; that the "mob," or the "people," according to the critic's point of view, were incapable of serious thought on serious questions; that propaganda methods, as first universally employed in the war, had overshot their mark and rendered enthusiasm an anachronism. Judging from what I myself observed in my Borough—and indeed elsewhere—I should imagine that the loss of interest in affairs of government was due to very much the same causes as those which have furthered the decline of religion: I mean the deplorable lack of oppressors, to which may be added the equally deplorable lack of heroes. An Attila or a Napoleon, whatever you might think of him, was bound to interest you one way or the other; a modern Prime Minister, being a person like yourself, speaking the same language, struggling scarcely more hopefully

than yourself against the same problems, a man in no respect different from yourself, is scarcely likely to arouse your enthusiasm, especially if you believe him to be as honest and well meaning as he is incapable and inexperienced and devoid of even the slightest trace of persecuting zeal.

Modern publicity has, of course, had its say in this matter. Oliver Cromwell and Frederick the Great were in most respects ordinary human beings—later historians have indeed proved it for us—but in their time, knowing nothing of the importunities of the interviewer or the professional biographer, very few people were aware of it. To the rest of the world they were portents, to be loved or dreaded as such. So to a lesser degree it was with the great statesmen of our grandfathers' times; a Beaconsfield, a Gladstone or a Palmerston seemed to be—as in fact they were—quite out of the ordinary run of men, creatures with possibilities of which the "man in the street" owned himself incapable. If you compare them with the amiable modern leaders of post-war England, whose chief outstanding features, as noted by the publicists, were their striking likeness to everyone else, it is difficult not to see why the other type of statesman aroused such relative enthusiasm. Even in their minor peculiarities, which small folk love, they were "different." Mr. Gladstone's shirt collar was as typical of himself as was his habit of cutting down trees—but they were typical of no one else; Lord Beaconsfield's hair, his foppery, his very Orientalism provided excellent food for the cari-

caturist; but they were peculiar to himself. If you compare with them a polite gentleman who smokes just such a pipe as everyone else smokes, and proclaims aloud his enthusiasm for a brand of tobacco that anyone can buy; who wears extremely shabby clothes, just like those worn by the least distinguished of voters, and whose speeches are couched in exactly the same variety of English as that preferred by Mr. Andrews or Mrs. Thwaites, he may be loved, but he is not likely to be feared—or followed. If, again, he openly declare that he is extremely anxious to do for the best and the best for England, but is not at all sure how to do it, he merely proclaims himself your equal—and the people of my Borough have never had much enthusiasm for their equals. Could he, dared he, show even a trace of personality or of persecuting zeal, he might arouse opposition, he would certainly obtain enthusiastic followers; in either case he would be sure of standing out of the ruck of well-meaning mediocrity.

It seemed, then, to me that the rather unexpected lack of interest in politics, imperial, national and civic, shown by my Borough was less the fault of the people than of their period. They were not oppressed; they were as well governed as those men and women of their own class and standard they had themselves elected knew how to do it; the everyday business of the country, managed by a capable but unseen civil service, was efficiently conducted; they had no figures of romance or heroism, or even of distinction to arouse them; in their own words, "Why worry?" The

franchise had by that time been extended so widely that the individual vote or voter had no apparent weight—why vote ? The Government of the moment might make unending mistakes, but so would their opponents, as had their predecessors and would their successors. Why trouble to strike a balance between them ? They are all ordinary people like ourselves, concluded my Borough. Why pay more attention to what they say or do than to the words or deeds of the lady next door but two ?

It might have been expected that, even were they uninterested in the affairs of the Empire or those of the United Kingdom in general, the people of Romwell would have shown themselves keener when it was their own immediate community which was in question, that, even if they held aloof in Parliamentary contests, they would have hurried to record their votes in an election of Borough Councillors. That the contrary was actually the case is less surprising if we remember that Romwell was not an isolated town or village, but one of a dozen great cities, inevitably bound together by bonds so intricate that it was difficult in many cases to say where the interests of the one began or those of the other ended, opposed though they might be. Thus, while Romwell might have the actual carrying out of some of her civic duties, others were in the charge of the London County Council, yet others in that of the Central Government ; even in a matter so vital as the control of her pacific army, the police, Romwell had not a word to say. I never heard a man boast, or even mention that he was

a Romwellian ; though he might declare, usually with that air of self-pity which is one of his national and deceptive heritages, that he was a Londoner.

If, added to that lack of local civic personality, you remember, further, the vastness and the lack of graspable reality of the congeries of cities that is called London, you can understand, even if you do not excuse, the lack of civic patriotism which was so marked a characteristic of my—and other—Boroughs.

There was, I think, no lack of real patriotism. Had they felt that their country was really in danger from without, the men of Romwell and her sister Boroughs would have risen as they had risen so often before and so recently. Because they did not attach such exaggerated value to the waving of the national flag as did the people of younger nations, because they refrained from calling continually upon the shades of their national heroes as did younger and more emotional peoples, was no proof that they did not feel their value or their appeal. Mankind speaks least of what it values most. Just as the Oriental never mentions his wife or his home in strange company, so the Englishman is a little ashamed to boast of that flag which canopies the world. Because he has had such a wealth of national heroes in the long story of his history, he does not need to boast of their merits. The English have had five hundred George Washingtons, I can imagine Sir Manual Peck declaiming in an address to the Romwell Troop of Boy Scouts. Why give divine honours to one more than to another ? The English flag has never known final defeat. Why trouble to

protest that it is unconquerable? English soil has never known the "proud foot of the conqueror," no foreign army has ever marched through London streets, no invader has ever burnt the Capitol of her liberties. Why insist upon it? These things are, and must be, and every Englishman knows it, as he knows that English—spoken in many accents—is the language of Heaven and the Union Jack the flag which waves unspoken of, but not unnoticed, above the battlements of Heaven. The Englishman does not boast, Sir Manual might conclude, he need not.

Those of my Borough's critics who shook their heads sadly over some imagined lack of civic or national spirit and loosed pessimistic prophecies about the Empire's future, were thus, I think, unnecessarily alarmed. Whether the British Empire is fated to endure in its present unfinished form, to harden into something more compact, or to dissolve into its several components, depends less, if I may venture an opinion, upon the zeal or sloth of the people of All the Romwells than upon the British nations overseas. The English "people" were very little consulted in the building up of their Empire in its present form. To supervise its fashioning was the prerogative of perhaps the most capable governing class that history records; the people of the streets were yesterday and are today unmindful of any problems but those immediately confronting them; so long as the unseen directors of the national policy remain capable of controlling events, the sun is little likely to set upon the Empire. When they ask for any special effort from

their people, they know it will be made ungrudgingly. Were the direction of those efforts left to the " people of England," the prospect, as they themselves are the first to recognise, would be uncertain enough. Fortunately the people of Romwell, as of the other Englands, perfectly realised their own limitations, and, despite the urgings of well-meaning idealists, had as little the wish as they had the power to drive the coursers of the sun, whatever the temptation.

After all, a tractable, not too self-conscious population is an excellent basis on which to build a Government. Had I to choose a motto politically expressive of the people of my Borough, the most appropriate would certainly be " Why worry ? " ; I am not at all sure it would not also be the most hopeful for the country's future.

At least, were I an earnest Bolshevist, I can imagine no more depressing environment than that, mental, moral and spiritual, of my Borough. Which is perhaps the reason why, although I often sought for " Reds " in Romwell, I always sought in vain.

CHAPTER THE ELEVENTH

THE LAW OF ORDER

As I opened the door of my sitting-room, I became aware of a pencil of light wandering, in rather errant fashion, about the walls and of a voice exclaiming nervously " 'Ands up."

I pressed the lighting switch beside the door and found myself in the presence of a burglar. A very small man, with a very scared face, was crouched beside the writing table in the bow window. In one hand he held the errant flash lamp, in the other what appeared to be a very brightly burnished revolver, which I recognised at once for one of the imitations, at that time a popular toy, warranted not to fire anything more deadly than caps under any circumstances.

" I won't 'urt you, if you do what you're told," continued the little burglar even more nervously, as I came further into the room and closed the door.

I happen to be more solidly built than I could wish, and he was such a very little burglar and so very frightened that the command struck me as amusing. I suppose my laugh sounded menacing under the circumstances, for the little burglar, after a moment's hesitation, appealed for mercy, assured me that he was a plasterer by trade, that he had a wife and I forget how many children, which I did not believe,

and finally burst into hypocritical tears. In reply to my further queries, he told me that he was driven to crime by starvation, that he had been seeking employment I forget how many months, that he would be thankful to the day of his death for any honest work, and similar improbabilities to the same purport. In the end, as you may suppose, I gave him five shillings, let him out by the front door, in order not to disturb the house, and thereby, as I discovered later, rendered myself liable to I know not what penalty for compounding a felony. When I called at the address he gave me, I found it as mythical as the rest of his story, and the only reason I now remember him is for the delightful impudence with which, being some time later haled before a police magistrate on some charge of petty larceny, he gave my name as a reference for his previous good character and reliability.

A community, I take it, may be known by its criminals as much as in any other way, and of England a traveller may say with some confidence that it is the only country in the world in which an elderly man or a woman may feel secure in a lonely country cottage without a revolver and a brace of Airedales. This may be due to tradition, to the homogeneity of the population, but most of all to the urbanity of the people, the criminals among them not excepted. That England is of all countries that in which the taking of human life is most seriously regarded is, although it might seem the strongest of reasons, I am inclined to think really only subsidiary. True that an English criminal—less fortunate than some of his foreign

colleagues—knows that if he kill in the course of his unlawful occasions he will inevitably hang for it; it is no less true that he would, all consequences apart, as much dislike the killing of one of his fellow men as would the most peaceful of his fellow citizens.

Concerning murder, it has become a common cliché that all murderers—some enthusiasts, of course, go further and include all criminals whatsoever—are mentally unbalanced. This may be true, if we further postulate that all big game hunters, fox hunters and others who take life for the fun or profit of it are also lunatics. It was never my fortune to become acquainted with any murderer in Romwell, but I have known two, one an Englishman, the other a Frenchman, on terms of some intimacy, and neither of them was in the least different, in externals or mental outlook, to any other man of business. Both, that is to say, killed for profit; both in all the other circumstances of life were men of good, which is to say, unnoticeable characters; neither certainly was less normal than a speculator in any other branch of business.

Leaving them and such other man-slaughterers as do their killings under the influence of jealousy, insanity or other causes beyond their own control altogether aside, the so-called criminal is in many cases and many countries not criminal at all. Certainly this was the case in my Borough, where the majority of those who came within the cognizance of the law were easily divisible into two classes, the abnormality —naturally or by environment—and the anachronism.

There was, as I was told, more petty dishonesty in

METROPOLITAN BOROUGH OF BETHNAL GREEN PUBLIC LIBRARIES

the Borough than in preceding generations, especially among the young. This was variously attributed to lack of home discipline, increasing street temptations and other causes, high among which I should have been inclined to place, as far as my experience went, war traditions and—from Mr. Burgess, of the "off-licence"—a popular misreading of an otherwise unobjectionable measure, the First Offenders Act. Those who served abroad during the European War need not be reminded that in the community of property prevailing at the Front, "winning" or "scrounging" was not regarded as theft. Men were rather inclined to boast of it than otherwise and, returning home, handed on their acquired attitude towards property, to become an inherited tradition among their children. Again, it was popularly believed, as I have already noted in the case of Mr. Burgess, that a man, or more particularly, a hobbledehoy, was entitled to one piece of dishonesty—or, as more widely interpreted, to as many pieces of dishonesty as he could perpetrate before being found out for the first time. Employers, as in the case of Mr. Burgess, realising the unlikelihood that the culprit would receive any punishment, preferred to suffer minor losses rather than go to the trouble and expense of prosecuting, with the result that petty theft, leading in too many cases to the professionally criminal career, became something of a commonplace.

Very frequently was the unhappy eminence of becoming known to the police due neither to tradition, inheritance nor environment, but to qualities which, in

other times and under other circumstances were rightly held as virtues. Just as the young women of Romwell dreamed of Romance, so the young men yearned for Adventure. Adventure in its more seemly and befitting guises being rare in Romwell, the more enterprising youth was but too likely to seek it along paths contemned in that respectable community. My own observations, gained from a fairly close study of police court sittings in my Borough and buttressed upon conversations with a number of constables, led me to the belief that quite a large proportion of the young men convicted for such crimes as burglary, " smash and grab " robbery and the like were no more truly criminal than was Jason when he set out in search of the Golden Fleece, or any other protestant against the monotony of life. Secondly—and here let me admit that the idea was not originally my own, but came from a very efficient station sergeant at the Romwell Road Police Station—to the doubt whether among the many humanitarian " reforms " which left the country worse off than before they were introduced, might not be included the abolition of " transportation beyond the seas " as a method of punishment.

One of the most pressing needs of the Empire, we are frequently assured, is a wider distribution of its population. The Dominions cry out for men ; the redundant population of the Mother Country, as witnessed by the unemployment returns, continues to increase. As I note elsewhere, the increasing maternalism of successive British Governments renders it always less likely that emigration will ever again

become popular with the masses. Nor are they to be blamed for their attitude. When everything is made comfortable and always more comfortable for you at home, when you have a Universal Mother always at hand to safeguard every moment of your life from infancy to the grave, why risk all kinds of unpleasant adventures—hard work not the least among them—where, whatever else is new and strange, it is quite certain that you will not be able to live unless you earn your living ?

Such attempts at encouraging State or privately aided emigration as came under my observation suffered under the disability that they mostly attracted those ready to be bribed, who, failing such bribes, would very certainly stay at home and who, once having received their bribes, desire nothing more earnestly than to return home again. Anyone who has lived in Canada for any length of time has met dozens of these undesirable immigrants, whose whole aim is to get as much as possible out of their adopted country, while giving as little service in return, and who have already spread far and wide the unfortunate belief, rooted in the hearts of too many Canadians and Australians, that the home-born Englishman is work-shy and a malingerer.

If now our shipments of human cargo were made up of such young " criminals " as I have mentioned, whose " crimes " are the direct result of their unfortunately directed lust for adventure ; if they were selected—and it would not be difficult to select them—before they had time or temptation to become hardened

in crime, not only would you give them the chance of finding the needed outlet for that lust, but you would give to the Dominion which received them exactly that type of eager adventurous young man which is there so badly wanted. It is true that you would thereby deprive the home-staying population of Great Britain of some of the most potentially useful of its citizens, as proof of which you may compare the population of Australia with that of, say, my Borough, and reflect upon the method in which that population was first established in the Antipodes.

How law-abiding is the population of Romwell, how small and unimaginative is its criminality, and how alien to it those tendencies which lead, according to the way they are directed, either to the gallows or a grave in Westminster Abbey, you might learn for yourself in the course of a few instructive days' sitting at the feet of one of the Borough police magistrates.

If the State aspired to the position of Universal Mother, certainly the police magistrate had succeeded already to that of Universal Aunt, and the contrast between the man and his methods and those of any other man holding a similar post in any other country with which I am acquainted was ludicrous enough. For there was about him, his personality and the popular estimation in which he was held, nothing at all of the stern judge; everything of the patient, kindly counsellor to whom you apply for advice under every conceivable difficulty, from a gramophone which whines too loudly in a neighbouring house to the young man who aspires too persistently to the hand

of your daughter. And as was the magistrate, so were his nursing sisters, the Police.

The Metropolitan Police is perhaps the one really satisfactory example of British propaganda abroad. I have never been anywhere, from Chili to Czecho-Slovakia, where the amiability of the London Policeman, his intelligence, his politeness, his readiness to aid, were not accepted as international commonplaces. Nor, returning to dwell beneath the shadow of his mantle, did I find any cause to think the picture overdrawn. Rather, I often wondered how, despite the universal adulation to which he was subject, the kindly tolerance with which he was regarded even by the criminals who trembled—or should tremble—at his glance, he yet retained, co-equal with his gentler qualities, a level of efficiency at least as high as that of the brusquer—and, on occasion, more brutal New York "Finest" or of the harassed, over-zealous "flic" of Paris.

In my Borough—which offered no higher attractions to the super-criminal than to the foreign visitor—no very great calls were, indeed, made upon the sterner qualities of the policeman. The superintendence of traffic accidents; the arresting of defaulting rate-payers or wife-beaters; an occasional feat of arms at the expense of a more than usually obstructive drunkard; such were the more serious items of his daily duty and, needless to say, he performed them to the general admiration. But it was in the kindlier—I had almost written more womanly—*rôle* of counsellor, champion and friend that he was more familiar.

Next to the "Grey Mare," there was, I think, no

institution which occupied a larger—though admittedly less continuous—share in the day's enjoyment of my Borough than the police court, nor any person doomed to a more monotonous life than the magistrate—save perhaps the "chucker out" at the less select rivals of the "Grey Mare," with whom I once heard a client express his sympathy at always having to "chuck drunken men out of one door, only to have them come in at another." I suppose I have listened to as many cases as any man not professionally employed about the court, yet I can remember few—and those extremely unpleasant—which in any way differed, save in detail, from any of the others. They were, that is to say, divided almost exclusively among three classes of monotony: drunkenness, matrimonial disputes and petty theft, to which might be added, though scarcely coming under the heading of crime, offences by motorists. The day would begin with a procession—varying in length with the season of the year and the day of the week—of drunkards, or "D. and D." who had added disorderliness to intemperance. A dishevelled prisoner would hurry eagerly into the little pen reserved for him or her, would listen to the charge with a sheepish smile which yet had something of satisfaction in it, as of one who has gained public eminence, while a bored policeman hurriedly detailed an account of his offence. Nine times out of ten he would plead guilty with an apologetic smirk. The magistrate would inflict some small penalty and the offender would shuffle away with the complacent air of virtue well rewarded.

To the drunkards would succeed another, longer procession of blear—or black—eyed females, primed to the lips with wordy pictures of their wrongs, fiercely apostrophising other females as dishevelled as themselves with a turgid wealth of epithet, to all of which the magistrate would listen with an admirably assumed air of interest, which I am sure he did not feel, would give them, in few words—and those I imagine become almost automatic from frequent use—needed advice or merited reproof, and they in turn would give place, reluctantly, to be followed by other, equally clamant females, demanding vengeance on husbands lurking apprehensively in the background. Finally, amid a buzz of interest from the small audience, composed of relatives and friends of plaintiff or defendant, some pimply reprobate of immature years, charged with robbing his master's till or his landlady's cupboard, would loaf into the pen, arranging his expression to suggest devout repentance or injured innocence, as the facts of the case were more or less notorious. The magistrate would inflict the appropriate penalty, or more frequently let the culprit go free upon probation, the assistance would rise, with an air of duty well done, and the proceedings would terminate, to be resumed, in duplicate, the next day.

So far the Romwell Court differed in procedure only in minor degrees from similar tribunals in Paris or New York, or for that matter, in Tiflis or in Teheran. But where it differed, and that so widely as to be in my experience unique, was in its atmosphere. I suppose that some of the involuntary attendants,

conscious of their guilt, must have found something menacing about it ; by far the greater number regarded it as a pleasant place to spend an idle day, with the possibility of picking up some scrap of useful information that might be made profitable later. The magistrate was obviously a valued friend, a solver of riddles ; you called upon him, as it were, to discuss the bad behaviour of your husband or your neighbour, the high cost of living, or the difficulties of bringing up a young family, just as you would have applied, in an earlier generation, to some elderly relative whose advice you valued. Many of the problems seemed, to the outsider, simple enough to have been settled by the applicant herself ; instead she preferred to lay it in the ample bosom of what was once the Law. You regulated your life and that of your husband and your children and the lady next door upon what this trusted adviser thought expedient. You willingly delegated to him the responsibility of making decisions which in another age and another convention you would not have hesitated to make for yourself. The police magistrate had become, in fact, in my Borough and in all the rest, a welcome excuse to avoid thinking for yourself, doing anything for which you might incur responsibility, taking any risk, offending in any way against that overshadowing motto by which your daily life was more and more becoming regulated, of " Safety First."

I know of no institution more illustrative of the trend of Democracy than a London Police Court.

CHAPTER THE TWELFTH

LITTLE BUSINESS

We have all been the recipients of compliments at one time or another, even if only in our cradles, so I must not be thought to boast if I say that I was paid a high compliment when called upon to debate the important question of the second-hand bookshop. It is true that, as I learned more than once indirectly, I was regarded as quaintly bookish in my tastes, especially by Mrs. Mellon and her family, which may have had something to do with it.

I never happened to pass the second-hand bookshop, or I should certainly have noticed it. Second-hand bookshops always command me, for one thing; for another they were sufficiently rare in my Borough to command attention. But, not only was Mr. Cheadle's second-hand bookshop inconspicuously placed, in a narrow street, though within a few yards of a main thoroughfare; it was not actually within the limits of my Borough at all. So I should never have known of it and should not now possess several precious if shabby companions, had not Mr. Cheadle been brother and sole surviving relative of Charley Wilson's mother. Charley Wilson conducted a motor bus, and when I first knew him was walking out with Lettuce Mellon, whose mother made us acquainted, as you

may remember, in the new Saloon Lounge of the "Grey Mare." Charley was not bookishly inclined, though properly tolerant of those who were, and I fear that he rather neglected his uncle during his lifetime. The old gentleman bore him no malice, and, in dying, left him by will both the second-hand bookshop and a pleasant little sum of two hundred pounds or thereabouts he had somehow saved out of his meagre profits. Whence naturally arose the important question as to the future of the bookshop.

Knowing by that time something of the local taste in letters, I suggested that the lease, stock and goodwill be sold at once for what they would fetch and the proceeds invested in some reliable security. There was, however, another aspect of the question first to be considered, though, lacking expert knowledge, I had not realised it. Mr. Cheadle had relied for patronage not upon the neighbourhood in which he lived, but had carried on his business by correspondence, answering or inserting advertisements of rare books and having a connection among collectors over quite a wide area. Charley's brother-in-law-to-be, a man of good sense and practical experience, supported me, however, and our view was in the event adopted.

When we—by which I mean Mrs. Mellon, Charley, Lettuce, Mr. and Mrs. Bob Patten and I—had inspected the premises, we adjourned to the back parlour behind Mr. Patten's own shop, to discuss the pros and cons over a bottle—or two—of Imperial Port, sent

for for the occasion from the off-licence at the corner. It was a very little parlour and we were rather inconveniently crowded, but, as Mrs. Mellon facetiously pointed out, that only made it easier to reach the bottle when you wanted it, and the problem was debated in the highest amity and ultimately decided by a unanimous vote.

Mr. Bob Patten, being alone capable of speaking with the bitter voice of experience, had the deciding voice in the affair. And in his view, the Little Business, generically, had caused more misery in my Borough than gambling, drink and matrimony all taken together. I put the greater weight upon his verdict in that he was one of the very few men of whom I had heard who, having rashly invested in a Little Business, had not found bitter cause to rue it—being it was true, an exceptional man.

Although the principal shopping districts of the post-war Borough had become almost the preserve of the great " multiple " stores, so that a walk down the chief business section of the High Road revealed at least two branches of some alien business to one native establishment—(perhaps even more, for I have been told that many of those which appeared to be " one-man " concerns were in fact branches of some great central organisation that preferred to remain anonymous)—the Little Business was still the more characteristic of my Borough, though losing ground almost every day. To find it at its most characteristic and, as I have said, its most flourishing, you could not do better than visit Mr. Patten's shop in Juniper Street.

It was a very little shop, of the kind technically called "general," which is to say that, in addition to groceries, which were its chief stand-by, it sold almost everything for which there was the slightest chance of demand in the radius of its sway, from cheap sweets to cheaper remedies for them. It was in the middle of a dense labyrinth of streets, made up of little cottages, lying to the north of Barnard's Grove and perhaps half a mile from the nearest important shopping centre—whence its comparative prosperity. It was, by comparison with its surroundings, outwardly quite picturesque. It was housed in a building that had once been a stable, the arched entrance to which had been turned into a shop-window. It stood perhaps a dozen feet behind the line of the cottages to right and left and before it were two well-grown healthy plane trees and a large stone post, of mysterious origin, which Mr. Patten was accustomed to plaster with bright-hued posters advertising teas or pickles, with artistic effect.

I have seen a good many Little Businesses in my time, but if you except the reed basket of a West African market place, I do not think I have ever seen a smaller in respect of floor space for customers than the little shop in Juniper Street. As you entered you were hemmed in on all sides by shelves, bulkheads, counters, all alike covered with tins of the very brightest colours. For it was the peculiarity—and the tragedy—of such little shops that they sold nothing—or practically nothing—of their own providing, but acted as distributors for "proprietary" goods put

up by others very much more prosperous. And, lest you should think there was a comfortable income to be made out of such dealings, as, given a large turnover, there might be, I need but introduce a customer whose entry happened on one occasion to synchronise with my own. She was a very small customer, scarcely as tall as the little counter, but she knew what she wanted. With a grubby paw stretched high above her head and holding a penny she explained, "'A'p'ny milk an' a'p'ny change"—the "milk," I should perhaps explain, meaning milk-chocolate.

Mr. Patten once told me that he managed to make a net profit of fifty shillings a week out of the little shop—on which to keep himself and his wife. But he was—and in so being contrasted markedly with the majority of the little shopkeepers of my Borough—a man of enterprise and initiative, as well as a really hard worker. Shortly before I got to know him, he bought, on the hire system, of all strange methods, a night coffee stall at a busy corner of the High Road. There, with a casual assistant to tow the stall into position as soon as the public houses were closed, he worked until dawn, spending his mornings in bed, what time his wife attended to the shop. With the coffee stall—which he was able to work in conjunction with the little shop, furnishing much of his provisions from the stock, he could clear as much as three pounds a week—or a clear two pounds, after allowing for his repayments towards the original price. Not only so, but, again shortly before I got to know him, he—or Mrs. Patten—made an even

riskier plunge. The little shop took up only one-half of the old stable frontage, the other half having long served as the warehouse of a dealer in old iron and what used to be called, in Dickens' time, marine stores. The marine-store dealer dying opportunely, much, I fear, to Mr. Patten's gratification, for he must have been an uninspiring neighbour, Mr. Patten, at his wife's behest, took a lease of his premises, and there Mrs. Patten established a new business altogether, that of the smallest kind of haberdasher, offering pins, babies' socks and comforters, dress shields, anything the cost of which was of the smallest number of pence and never ran into shillings. When I first knew it the paint was hardly dry, but it looked so bright and attractive that, had I been in the habit of wearing art-silk stockings, blue elastic garters or woolly bonnets, I do not think I could have resisted its temptation.

That Mr. Patten, an unusual man with an unusual wife, should have embarked upon an enterprise of which in theory he so strongly disapproved, was a curious side-light on the tragedy of the Little Business. Son to the butler of a noble family, descendant of a long line of ancestors similarly employed, he started life, by right of heredity, in domestic service. His father was improvident, so that his was but a small inheritance, but having been ten years with "the Family," he fell in love with Gwindermera Mellon—who was Mrs. Mellon's first-born and so named in memory of a honeymoon spent in the Lake District. She was then apprenticed in a dressmaker's establish-

ment, earning, as I have her mother's authority for saying, between two and three pounds a week and with excellent prospects. Mr. Patten, having inherited, I suppose, his father's temperament, married her at once, although he knew the rash step entailed the loss of his position. His noble employer, having a romantic side, made him a wedding present of two hundred pounds. With it, unexpectedly enough as it seems to me, he bought the goodwill of the little shop in Juniper Street, selecting it as being near his wife's former home and birthplace. He did so purely—or almost purely—for social reasons!

Some years ago I was delighted to read, in the Press of another London, a remonstrative letter from a gentleman who kept a very large shop indeed. He appeared to think that some social disability attached to the name "shop-keeper," and insisted that, although such a name might be very well for the keepers of little humble shops, a person doing business on such a large scale as did he deserved a nobler style, and that he wished in future to be known and considered as a merchant prince. Being a large advertiser, his letter was, of course, published, though I do not know how far it benefited his social status. Had he lived and driven his business in Romwell, it would have been perfectly incomprehensible to local merchant princes, for with very inconsiderable exceptions, such as publicans, curates, or such rare phenomena as Sir Manuel Peck, K.B.E., they had few social superiors.

My Borough differed in fact from every other community familiar to me, save perhaps the Lower East

Side of New York, in the relative position of shopkeeper and customer. Elsewhere, probably in China, which I do not know, certainly in Peru, which I do, the balance of favour, if any, lay with the customer. In other Londons, or most of them, you might, as customer, count upon being greeted with a certain deference, on being addressed as " Sir " or " Moddom " according to your sex. Bowing attendants would conduct you to your chosen counter; it would be suggested, in manner if not in words, that your patronage was regarded as an honour. There were, of course, exceptions; in France, for one, the assistant would allow his dislike to be evident even while he bowed before you, unless he knew you for a very rich foreigner indeed, but that was because he did not like foreigners.

In my Borough things were different, and that in the big multiple stores as well as in such little principalities as Mr. Patten's. Distinctions, of course, there were. Were you of mature years, Mr. Andrews, of the Egg Distributors, would call you " Mother " or " Dad," according to sex; were you a young lady, you would be " Missy "; a young man was " Sonny " or " my lad," according to seniority. Me he greeted as " ol' man," but that was an unique mark of distinction, because we were friends.

In the open-air market, round about the railway arches, you were uniformly called " my dear," whatever your age or sex. In the big department stores in the High Road you were not called anything, but treated with the polite tolerance usually reserved for a

favoured but erring child, and told what were your real wishes, as against those you had ventured to express, with the kindly patience proper to a Bishop's lady.

If then, even in the High Road, where competition was at its keenest, the local merchant princes were recognised as of a superior caste, imagine how it was in such a place as Juniper Street, where the general shop, however absolutely humble, relatively reigned alone, sole home of capitalism in a proletarian world extending over a dozen acres. I never heard Mr. Patten addressed by his regular customers otherwise than as " Sir," save by some few whose long servitude privileged them to call him " Mr. Patten, Sir." I never heard anyone else so addressed except the licensee of the " Seven Bells " beerhouse, further along the street, and, when there was something to be got out of him, the curate-in-charge of the Mission Hall round the corner in Wilde Place. Mr. Patten was the apex of the Juniper Street social pyramid, and to Mr. Patten—and not to Mr. Patten alone—it were preferable to be Director of the Protocol of Juniper Street than servitor in the House of a Hundred Earls.

In one way or another, I suppose, Mr. Patten, being exceptional, made his six pounds a week and might call himself a successful and a happy man, even though, with half the toil and anxiety, he might have doubled his income, wearing another man's livery. But, by the man who is not exceptional, social precedence may be bought too dear—and therein lay the real tragedy of the Little Business in my Borough. I was first taught to realise it by a tin kettle.

I happened to need a kettle to boil the water for my early morning tea. I went to one of the little shops in Barnard's Grove and bought one, a very good one, as it proved. I paid for it one shilling and elevenpence three farthings. That afternoon I happened to walk down the High Road. In the window of one of the great Five and Ten Cent branch stores I saw a grove of kettles—at sixpence apiece. Out of curiosity I bought one. I compared it with my earlier purchase. It looked precisely similar ; it heated water as well and as quickly ; it was of the same capacity. You may suppose what a grievance I cherished against the vendor of the dearer kettle, and had I not happened to discuss the matter with Mr. Patten, I should be feeling that grievance now. Mr. Patten did not deal in kettles.

He told me that the small shopkeeper had himself paid, wholesale, as much as fifteen pence for his kettle, and could not obtain it more cheaply ; that it was no doubt an English-made kettle, and after three or four years would still be fit for active service, while my sixpenny purchase, which probably came from Czecho-Slovakia, would then have been long since worn out. I did not tell him that I was shortly leaving Romwell, that I should certainly take neither kettle with me, and that such a preposterous term of service was accordingly wasted upon me. I did, however point out that, to a purchaser of small means, the difference between sixpence and two shillings was very considerable.

Mr. Patten agreed that it was impossible for the Little Business ever to compete with the great multiple store because, in a case of kettles, quite apart from

their origins or original cost, the great store could buy ten thousand at a time, while the small one could afford to speculate in, at most, a dozen. Thus, he went on, the Little Business was fast being driven out of all such avenues of enterprise as might bring due return for industry or knowledge and forced to become no more than distributing agent for others. He showed me how, on his crowded shelves, there was scarcely one commodity, from mustard to Epsom Salts, which was not of a " branded " variety, which he was not selling purely as tied agent, with no voice in its selection, its quality or its price, and he instanced how, under the growing stress of competition, the meagre commission he earned upon the sale was being reduced almost to vanishing point.

Mr. Patten would willingly have talked for hours about the competition of his greater rivals, the " multiple " and department stores and the co-operative societies, against whom he had a special grudge, because, as he declared, they paid no income tax, though I do not know that he himself paid very much. But these general grievances are common, I take it, to the Little Business in all countries ; deeper and more particular was the tragedy of those technically known as " tobacco, sweets and general," for they were outside ordinary business considerations alto-gether.

Whenever the widow of a working-man killed in his employment received compensation, or a domestic servant inherited a legacy from a grateful employer, whenever, in fact, anyone in a small station in life,

which you might almost say was anyone in Romwell, came unexpectedly into a small sum of money, their first impulse, according to Mr. Patten—I have been told the same thing by a police magistrate—was, not to gamble it or drink it away, but to buy with it a "tobacco, sweets and general." They were attracted at once by the social prestige to which I have referred, by the seeming ease and simplicity of sitting in state behind your own counter, accepting subsidies from eager shoppers and the certainty, insisted upon by unscrupulous vendors or agents, of a settled income for life. Knowing nothing whatsoever of business, either generally or under particular local conditions, in six months their capital was gone, their "goodwill" worthless, and they made way for yet another postulant for rainbow gold. Profits were certainly to be made out of such little businesses, said Mr. Patten, but they were made by rogues who carried on a flourishing industry of dressing up little bankrupt concerns, falsifying their books, inventing their goodwills, and disposing of them to the ever eager "suckers." Perhaps he exaggerated, as men do who speak in bitterness ; I can testify from my own knowledge that, out of a terrace of twenty-two small shops I used to pass in Barnard's Grove, six were devoted to the sale of tobacco, confectionery and newspapers—and that they changed hands very often.

Lest you should gain too gloomy an idea of the little shop-keepers of Romwell, I would remind you that everywhere success awaits the successful, and that, to a man possessing the requisite talents, the

little business was not without its possibilities, even in my Borough. Mr. Patten was an example of a man who made his living by it; two other exceptions occur to me as exemplifying the rest.

In a side street off the main road, which I sometimes used as a short cut, was an extremely dirty little ham-and-beef shop. Theoretically such a shop should have scope for wide prosperity in a district where, through lack of domestic knowledge and of space for culinary experiments, the unhealthy habit of eating your meals out of a tin alternated with that of buying your food ready cooked. Nevertheless, the ham-and-beef shops of my Borough were in many cases as unattractive, and seemingly, as unprofitable as the fried-fish shops, serving a similar end, were ubiquitous, prosperous, and save for the smell, attractive. It is true that many of the latter were in Jewish hands.

One day, in passing, I noticed that the windows of the ham-and-beef shop had actually been cleaned, so that their contents were vaguely visible. A day or two later the inside of the shop showed traces of fresh paint. A fortnight later the whole had undergone a transformation, from depressing dearth to radiant prosperity, from a monotony of ham to a plethora of choice. Thrilled by such signs of progress, I entered, to help as far as might my small patronage. The new proprietor received me with a polite warmth to which I had long grown unaccustomed. He proved to be a Belgian.

I never heard how or why he, a foreigner, with a foreign wife for sole supporter, came to embark upon

such an enterprise. I should have trembled for him had he chosen some foreign cities I wot of for his adventure. But the wide-minded tolerance of the English, their unique lack of xenophobia, strive as may earnest nationalists to arouse it in them, stood the adventurer in good stead. From the first he flourished, the more surprisingly that there was no local colony of his compatriots. He gave good food and good variety, and I have no doubt, good value ; local housewives liked his cheery welcomes and his unprecedented courtesy ; ere I left the Borough he had become a local personage ; inhabitants of distant streets made pilgrimage to patronise him ; I should like to feel so certain as might he that I was born, deservedly, beneath a fortunate star.

At the launching of yet another little Argosy I was privileged to assist. In a convenient angle of the pavement formed by the jutting out of an old house beyond the modern building line of the High Road, a middle-aged man one day established himself, offering for sale a basketful of the South African pears which were then for the first time appearing on the market. I bought some from him ; they were cheap and excellent. I returned for more, as did other amateurs ; a week or two later he was presiding over two baskets, the second containing oranges. Yet later, with, no doubt, the consent of the authorities, a wooden trestle table appeared, supporting three baskets, the third containing grape-fruit, of which there was at the time a glut.

Within three months the first basket had developed

into an important stall, with quite a large assortment of fruits and nuts, an æsthetic asset to the pavement, especially after dusk, when its acetylene flare-lamp lent added radiance to the green and golden glories of the fruit. When I last visited it, a painted sign above it informed the world that the man who started business with one basket had acquired a branch—an entire shop in a near-by street, though wisely continuing his stall-business as well.

Thus you may see that, even in Romwell, there was the possibility that the smallest business, buttressed upon knowledge and industry and enterprise, might flourish and extend. There were few qualified to avail themselves of such possibilities, as was, in one sense, I suppose, for the general good. Where all is standardised and rationalised and graded and inspected, where honesty, on a wide enough scale, brings such huge profits that it does not pay to be dishonest, where cheapness, so far as it is consistent with quality, is the first law; where the interests of the individual weigh for nothing against those of the community, no doubt the Little Business is a wasteful anachronism, and it were better for all the world, himself included, that the small shop-keeper abandon a hopeless struggle, fit a master's collar round his neck, and seek an easier living as manager or assistant in some great firm with a thousand branches. But independence has its own value—even in our time—and I never visit my Borough nowadays but I make an errand into Juniper Street, to see if the flag still flies above the little castle in which Mr. Patten holds command over his own soul.

CHAPTER THE THIRTEENTH

THE MARKET PLACE

"Two and ten! Two and eight!! Two and six!!! Come now, who says two and six? Tell you what I'll do then. I'll give it away for two and six!! Two and four! Two and two—and I'll throw this loverly bit of neck in with it!! Come now, ladies! Don't be afraid of it!! Two bob! Who says two bob? Lady with the black hat, Jim. Done at two bob!!"

Mrs. Mellon, who had been shrewdly watching the descending offers, struck in at the psychological moment and stood ready with open purse, what time the assistant auctioneer filled in the interval, in a voice audible even above the surrounding din: "Oh, it's loverly! It's loverly!! Only got to look at it, my dears!! Oh it's loverly—it's loverly! Buy, now! Come Buy, Buy, Bibuy, Buy, Bibuy, Buy, Buy!!!"

The butcher handed the shapeless piece of meat, wrapped, with the attached lovely piece of neck, in a hasty shroud of newspaper, over the heads of the crowd. Mrs. Mellon thrust it into the string-bag she was kindly allowing me to carry for her, and led the way, shouldering herself through the eddying throng, towards a neighbouring vegetable stall where a similar Dutch auction was in progress.

It was seven o'clock on a Saturday evening. Mrs.

Mellon, having awaited the hour when the market-vendors, not possessing cold storage facilities, would be growing anxious to dispose of their remaining stock, had sallied out with her capacious string-bag in search, not only of her household supplies for the coming week, but of that pleasant excitement which was the highest recurring adventure of a monotonous life. From all parts of the Borough similar matrons, similarly anticipant and bearing similar shopping bags, were concentrated on that one small acre clustered at the feet of the tall railway arches. The main interest lay in the couple of streets and the small square officially dedicated to the stalls of the open-air traders. But the whole immediate neighbourhood partook of it; the big shops in the High Road were at their brightest; the crowds, overflowing the pavements, covered the roadways with a kaleidoscopic inter-weaving of heads leaping and receding as high light succeeded shadow where the acetylene flared and flickered.

Although the small shopkeeper of Romwell attributed most of his misfortunes to the "chain" stores and the co-operatives, the street-trader was also a formidable rival. Economically he was favoured, having no rates or taxes to pay, his sole "overhead" being the hire of his stall or barrow and the rent charged for his pitch. His offerings were in many cases fresher than those of his harassed competitor, owing to the quicker turnover of his small stocks. But I think his real attraction for Mrs. Mellon and her like was that which causes us to prefer farce to tragedy. Whatever

his private sorrows, he was always cheerful, with a ready quip wherewith to tempt and cajole the hesitating matron. And did he, as I suspected, sometimes thrust smaller apples or less ripe into the capacious bag held open for them, than those which crowned his stall-front, it was all but part of a great game in which the vanquished cherished no ill feeling, with other jousts in prospect, against the victor of the moment.

To the joys of battle were added the thrills of adventure. There was always the promise of excitement, of an accident, a quarrel, round which you could array yourselves in serried hundreds and comment sympathetically or caustically to your neighbours. You might yourself become involved in an exhilarating dispute, on a matter of priority of purchase or the congestion of the thoroughfare. There were free spectacles, the side-splitting humour of some new cheapjack, the overturning of a barrow, the bursting of a matron's overtaxed string-bag, an interval for relaxation before the booth of Mr. Punch, established on his selected pitch, I have been told, even before the Market grew about it.

I have seen many similar markets, bearing testimony to the common interests of humanity, in as many countries ; those, for there were more than one, in my Borough, differed from the rest chiefly in the amiability and adaptability of the crowd. Whereas in the rue Mouffetard, the housewife advances to the attack with a frown, angrily mistrustful of the vendor ; whereas in Hamilton Fish Park, as in the bazaars of Angora, it

is an established convention that you cheat lest you be cheated; below the Romwell railway arches reigned a smiling tolerance of others' failings and a sympathetic interest in others' troubles that crystallised the local life-philosophy. You are not the less a man because you are a stranger; if you cheat me it is because you must, rather than because you will; I have too many troubles of my own to refuse understanding to yours; until I know you are untrustworthy, I shall trust you as I expect you to trust me.

That this breadth of tolerance was not confined to the familiar was curiously shown in an offshoot of the open-air market then recently instituted. An enterprising builder, having pulled down a row of decrepit cottages, set up in their place a narrow concreted arcade, lined on either side with shops facing a covered footway, and thus produced something as nearly as possible duplicating a Moorish or Algerian *souk*. Perhaps attracted by some atavistic approval of its externals, perhaps by the low rents charged at the outset of the experiment, this "covered market," as its builder termed it, was at once seized upon by the Children of Israel. Of some fifty little shops I doubt if a dozen were in Christian hands. Before every orifice, eagerly importuning the matronry of Romwell, were eager, handsome, olive-skinned faces with crinkly black hair and expressively Oriental gesture, trumpeting the incredible cheapness and inexpressible quality of the wares stacked within and festooned without their concrete booths.

Such a portent might seem natural enough in those

parts of East London where the Hebrew population exceeds the Christian. But in Romwell followers of the Jewish faith were comparatively few and very little in evidence—though they boasted of a very flourishing synagogue within a hundred yards of Barnard's Grove. In other countries their sudden inroad into and almost complete control of a whole section of a market thitherto preponderatingly Christian would have aroused ill-feeling and very possibly an outburst of anti-Semitism. Under the surface something of the sort may have existed in Romwell also, but I could never see any evidence of it. The matronry dealt just as readily with the Oriental as with the Gentile trader; less freely as it began to discover that the more flowery appeal of the newcomer did not presage any great reduction in prices or improvement in quality. Nor did I find that the native trader of Romwell, even when in sharp competition with them, displayed any greater animus against them than against his other rivals.

We know the man of Devon who talks of foreigners from Cornwall, the man of Kent who even to-day differentiates between himself and the mere Kentish man. When Mrs. Thwaites, in a time of scarcity, accepted after hesitation French guests beneath her roof, she confided to me, in some sense apologetically, "I told her I knew she was a foreigner, but I wanted her to feel quite at home and to know that it made no difference to me." Some months later it was a question of a negro law-student making application for a room, which in the end fell through, as the

former tenants decided to remain. Mrs. Thwaites indeed, consulted me, lest I should have any prejudice about colour, but was otherwise quite prepared to accept him as a man and a brother without more than friendly comment.

To Mrs. Thwaites or Charley Andrews, foreigners were no more than foreigners, strange, rather incomprehensible, creatures, naturally of a lower level than themselves, but none the less deserving to be treated as well as anyone else while they behaved themselves and did nothing startling or disconcerting. Romwell, indeed—and in this I may include all England—is the one community in which as a foreigner I should contemplate with equanimity the verdict of a local jury in a case in which my interests came into conflict with those of one of their own people. I never saw a trace of that xenophobia which is so markedly characteristic of the French, nor of that exaggerated colour prejudice which—with or without reason—is so very evident in some other countries.

I was particularly struck with this during a dispute which occurred during my stay in Romwell, on a matter of shopping hours. By one of those strange enactments which to the stranger seem frankly silly until he realises the underlying intention, it was decreed that shops be closed at certain arbitrary hours on certain days of the week. The obvious and desirable purpose of this decree was to protect shop-assistants against being forced to work too long hours. Now, to the ordinary outsider, the most simple way to attain the desired end with the least

interference to trade and public convenience were to enact that no shop assistant be employed for more than, let us say, eight hours a day; that the shopkeeper be perfectly at liberty to remain open throughout the twenty-four if he see profit in so doing, but that in that case he must employ three separate shifts of assistants. This, being too obvious for the official mind and the shopping hours being restricted, as I have said, caused great discontent among such small shopkeepers as, for instance, Mr. Patten, who employed no assistants at all. Why, they argued, should they be denied permission to work themselves when their work could inflict no possible hardship upon anyone?

The question was being hotly disputed in Romwell during my stay, the pros and cons being, as it seemed, about equally divided. At first I was mistaken as to the character and argument of the "early closers," believing that they were chiefly supported by the large firms employing many assistants, who rather ungenerously, as I supposed, resented the facilities wished for by their smaller "one-man" competitors. It turned out that I was wrong in this; there were as many small shopkeepers for as there were against this compulsory closing, its supporters resenting the being forced to be industrious themselves simply because their rivals wished to work!

This not very important dispute was very characteristic of English life in more respects than one. At two meetings of which I had cognisance, one in support of, the other protesting, against this measure, the

leaders and principal speakers were in one case a Jew and in the other a naturalised Italian. Both alike commanded the loyal and enthusiastic support of their followers, a high tribute alike to the commonsense and to the tolerance of my Borough.

In yet another way the Romwell Street Market gave an insight into the mental outlook of the English. There was at the time a considerable and very praiseworthy propaganda in favour of supporting home and Imperial industries. To the sympathetic onlooker, the able propagandists seemed, it is true, threatened by the opposing horns of a dilemma when they were forced by circumstances to insist with the same breath that the housekeeper buy British apples and Australian apples, butter from New Zealand and butter from Dorset, as though diametrically opposite interests could be reconciled by an appeal to patriotism.

Certain aspects of the campaign were all too patent even to such an uninstructed outsider as myself. Much of the money spent in this propaganda was wasted in that it was directed at people who were denied by circumstances, even when they wished, the opportunity of responding to it. Mrs. Thwaites, like every other housewife with whom I came in contact, was converted before the propaganda began, to the extent that as I have often heard her say, she would much prefer to buy, for instance, English rather than foreign eggs. But as there was a difference of price at that time of something like 1*s.* a dozen, or even more, between English and imported eggs of the

same quality, it was impossible for her to listen to the promptings of her heart. In a still larger number of cases the shopper thought very little as to the provenance of her goods, taking those offered her by the shopkeeper without having any idea at all where they came from. She would ask for half a pound of tea or a tin of condensed milk or a couple of oranges, accept what was given her as long as the price was low, and next time ask for " the same again."

Considering the hard lot of the small shopkeeper as I have endeavoured to describe it, the acuteness of the competition he had to face and the meagreness of his profits at the best of times, I could not find it in my heart to blame Mr. Bob Patten if he preferred to sell a brand of sugar or salmon or apples or matches which brought him a shade higher profit, irrespective of its origin. I knew nothing of the distribution of costs or profits, in the trades which catered to the necessities of the people of my Borough, but it was sufficiently obvious that unless and until the grower or manufacturer or wholesale dealer in goods of British or Imperial origin could or were content to sell such goods at rates by which the small shopkeeper could earn as great a profit and the small purchaser obtain them at as small a price as their foreign counterparts, their respective popularity in the eyes of Romwell shoppers was unlikely to vary very much.

A very striking feature of the Market was the way in which the ordered routine of Nature was entirely disregarded. The resident in, for instance, Paris, knows that only at certain times of the year can you

obtain, unless you are a rich man, certain kinds of fruit or vegetables, and that at the best of times their variety is limited. You might walk down the whole length of the rue Mouffetard in December and never see a stall or a barrow offering an eatable orange. At the same season and, indeed, on every day throughout the year you would find a dozen kinds of orange, at almost as many prices, anywhere in the Romwell Market Place. What this had to do with such disputed questions as Free Trade, State Aid or subsidised industry, it is not my place to consider; at least I am sure that even the smallest income in Romwell, as I have no doubt in all her sister Boroughs, could put at its owner's command such a wealth of variety of fish, flesh, fowl and fruit as was to be found in no other country except perhaps the United States. In the matter of cost the United States—including even the East Side of New York—could not be spoken of in the same breath.

As one of the earliest and most ubiquitous of human institutions, I suppose the open-air Market Place is bound sooner or later to be reformed out of existence, either by economic evolution or, intentionally, by some zealot appalled by its very evident defects and limitations. It will be a sad day for Romwell when that happens, while as for Mrs. Mellon and her string-bag—but the one is unthinkable without the other!

CHAPTER THE FOURTEENTH

THE CURSE OF ADAM

" Too much of this and too little of that ! "

Mr. Harnett paused as we were going under the brick arch leading to the Old English Garden and motioned with his thumb at the three tall smoke stacks of the Imperial Pickle Works, hovering distantly above the trees. " Workshy, that's what's the matter with them nowadays."

We passed through the archway into the glory of late summer flowers. Mr. Harnett, though he loved flowers to a passion, gazed at them almost disparagingly. " Workshy ! " he added. " And can you wonder at it ? "

There was at the time—as there was any time in the decade following the Great War—much discussion of the problem of unemployment in England. My Borough, as I have said elsewhere, suffered comparatively less than did the great centres of industry in the North and Midlands, for, by an easily understood phenomenon, the newer industries based upon such inventions as wireless, the gramophone and the like had moved to the South, the wider introduction of electric power making propinquity to the coalfields no longer necessary. The danger, however, was near enough at hand to cause grave uneasiness to

thinking men, and Mr. Harnett took it very seriously indeed. He took most things seriously for that matter, being of the older generation, and he sought a reason for everything, which alone was sufficient to brand him an eccentric in an age content to accept its facts ready made and to leave reasoning to others.

Mr. Harnett was the most outstanding Englishman I met in my Borough ; it is true he was of it only by adoption. A little, old, brown-skinned man, with the neatest of white moustaches and the smartness, with something of the brusqueness, of a Sergeant Major, he had yet never served in the Army, having for it a contempt dating, I suppose, from the days when soldiering was regarded as the last refuge of the destitute—as it will doubtless be again, until the next war threatens. Instead, he had served in the merchant navy ; he had been a diver ; he was for years travelling foreman with a great firm of contractors, in which capacity he worked upon railway tracks and embankments and piers and harbour works in half the countries from China to Peru. Especially was he familiar with certain South American Republics where I had also lived for a time, the first cause of our intimacy.

At the age of sixty-five Mr. Harnett retired, having accumulated a microscopical fortune and a pension, to settle, of all places in the world, in my Borough. As he was a Berkshire man and had few previous connections with London, this might have seemed causeless enough. Nevertheless, he had a reason and a good one. Somehow and somewhere he had become interested in the work of a certain great

hospital; he may have been a patient there, though he never told me so; at least he dedicated the later years of his life to its service, in a way peculiar to himself. He worked as earnestly as before he retired at whatever his hand found to do, lived entirely upon his private income or capital and gave every penny of what he earned to the hospital in question. He had become a sort of handyman, ready to undertake anything, from papering a room to mending a pair of boots; whatever he did he did well, and his charges were by no means low, lest hè should feel himself guilty, I gathered, of undercutting some younger man. I could never discover in him the least interest in politics; he regarded all politicians of whatever label as self-seeking rogues, although, as he would admit, he knew more about them in other countries than his own. Of religion he showed no conception at all; in our most intimate talks I never heard him refer to it either in praise or blame, and if I purposely introduced it he would shy from the subject like a frightened horse. He read much, getting his books from the Free Library, chiefly such Nature studies as those of Richard Jefferies, "A Son of the Marshes," or W. H. Hudson. His one really vivid interest was in the great hospital he served, though he had no place in its administration and never openly identified himself with it, except by his regular donations, amounting, I daresay, to two or three pounds a week.

Mr. Harnett and I were agreed in our liking for dahlias, because, I think, we had both seen them growing wild on the slopes of Popocatepetl. And

because we had heard that there was an unusually fine display of them in the Old English Garden in Romwell Park we made pilgrimage there together one sunny autumn day.

Romwell Park, though scarcely heard of north of the River, was one of the pleasantest of the smaller London pleasure grounds, perhaps because it was once a private plaisaunce and the County Council had wisely left it as unchanged as might be. As we walked through it together to the Old English Garden on one of its central slopes, Mr. Harnett remarked upon the number of young men and women who, although it was a weekday, were amusing themselves in one way or another, in most cases by lying on their backs on the grassy slopes, basking in the sunshine. Mr. Harnett, regarding them with frank contempt, declared that they were all "eating their dole, though most of them had never done a day's work in their lives." And he proceeded to say some very severe things about the "dole" and its effect upon character.

It would ill become one who can only speak from hearsay to criticise the method of Industrial Assurance chosen by the authorities of this country, but Mr. Harnett's criticisms were intelligible enough, and I quote them, not as representing my own opinions, which I do not feel qualified to give, but those of a very large percentage of the older inhabitants of my Borough. They were directed not against such Assurance as a whole—for he was fair enough to admit that the "dole" was not a charity, but a form of insurance—but against the whole philosophy it enshrined.

Perhaps because he had always worked so hard himself, perhaps only because he belonged to an older generation, Mr. Harnett was a profound believer in the virtue of labour for its own sake, apart from any worldly benefit it might bring. His objection to Industrial Assurance, as indeed to any similar form of State interference in the unemployment problem, save that of finding work for the workless, was that it must impair the will and the capacity to work. He based his arguments, which I need not quote at length, upon his personal knowledge of the industrial Midlands and the Welsh mining areas, where, he insisted, the young men, faced with unemployment, instead of going elsewhere, to the ends of the earth if necessary, to obtain it, had been induced, by the incidence of subsidies, to stay contentedly at home, unemployed and becoming always faster unemployable. A large proportion, he insisted, had lost all desire to work, as was not unnatural, partly as the result of the teaching of interested politicians, but more because, being human, when they discovered they could obtain almost as good a living by resting as by working, they not unnaturally preferred the former. And this mental attitude, he insisted, was fast spreading throughout the country, in Romwell no less than elsewhere.

It is not for one who lives in another country, where what Mr. Harnett called "spoon feeding" of the public is unknown, and where, either because or in spite of this, all classes alike work very much harder than is the case in England and for less reward, to

accept or deny the dicta of a man so frankly prejudiced, but I may be permitted to describe, as I myself saw it, the attitude towards the Curse of Adam, as it showed itself in my Borough in the third decade of the century. And it is, I think, undeniable that work, certainly in the sense of manual labour, was not at all popular among the younger generation. In part this may have been due to lack of discipline resulting from the war, in part to the arguments of agitators, in part to the social aspirations of the women, determined that their children should be Ladies and Gentlemen, which, in their eyes was, of course, impossible in a man or woman who worked with his hands, and in considerable part undoubtedly to the comfortable alternative of that " dole " upon which you could rely almost from the moment you left school, and if you were lucky and unscrupulous, during most of your life, until you were eligible for an Old Age Pension.

I have sometimes wondered what would have been the feelings of an old Roman patrician who advocated the keeping quiet of the plebians by giving them their fill of free bread and free circuses, could he have witnessed what was not only demanded, but actually lavished upon the " plebes " of Great Britain some two thousand years later. By the third decade of the twentieth century Romwell had far outstripped Rome in social service. A State-aided maternity service ushered the young " pleb " into the world, and a State grant helped his mother to suckle him. The State educated him, doctored him, and if he so

desired, fed him, while he was being educated. In some cases it also bought him boots in which to go to school. When he left school, the State in as many cases trained him for a job, and maintained him while he was being trained. The State insured him against sickness or unemployment, and under certain circumstances supplied him with coal and other necessaries. If he died prematurely, the State pensioned his widow; if he reached a ripe old age and had not exercised thrift —I admit I do not see how he could be expected to do so—the State pensioned him, and at his death buried him.

Not all these services were provided altogether without return. To obtain some, as for instance Unemployment Benefit, premiums had to be paid, but as a whole, such provision undoubtedly enshrined the axiom which I never heard honoured elsewhere in the world, that it is the duty of the State to support the individual citizen in reasonable comfort and security without exacting any return from him whatsoever.

If the people of England, as voiced by their representatives, desired this, and were able to enforce it—and to pay for it—I do not see that any outsider had any reason or excuse for objecting, even though it might seem to savour of endeavouring to nourish a dog by giving him his own tail to eat. But so far as my own observation was dependable, it was not conducive to industry in the individual. Which is not to blame him therefore. It is not everyone who has learnt that the most enjoyable form of recreation is hard work, especially when the State provides all

manner of amusements, parks, playing fields, and what you will, which superficially seem a good deal more agreeable. If you offer me free of all cost a livelihood, if not actually equal to that I could provide for myself by the very hardest of work, at least approximating to it, and in certain fortunate circumstances surpassing it, I need not be considered a criminal if I prefer the primrose path, especially when there are agreeable ways of supplementing it. In Romwell, there was, for instance, street mendicancy.

One of the most striking, and, to a thoughtful man, disturbing incidents of life in my Borough was the glorification of street begging. In the old days, we are told, the English were a stubborn proud race, who, when they could not work, were ashamed to beg. It was certainly no longer the case in Romwell. Children were, in fact, taught to beg, irrespective of their own or their parents' needs, almost as soon as they were out of their cradles. They were first of all familiarised with it in the form of "Flag Days," a means adopted by certain hospitals and charities, with, of course, the authorisation of the police, for raising much-needed voluntary funds. Hordes of young women with collecting boxes were let loose upon the streets, to cajole or blackmail the passer-by into handing over money which he would much prefer to keep for himself. Almost every church and chapel was plastered over with appeals to the charity of the passer-by. Press appeals for every conceivable cause were a daily commonplace. Children were encouraged in direct beggary, occasions being even manufactured or

revived for them. Such anniversaries as Guy Fawkes' Day, " Grotto Day " a—revival, as I understood it, of the old Festival of St. James—or Christmas, provided opportunities, for days or even weeks before the event, for droves of small children, more or less travestied, to infest the pavements, importuning the public, with the full approval of their parents, not to speak of the authorities.

This being so, it was scarcely surprising if, a little later in their careers, it occurred to them as a pleasant alternative to work, to station themselves on the curb in a busy thoroughfare, with a box of matches in their hand, at the receipt of charity. And such was the kindliness of the general public—Mrs. Thwaites was an incorrigible giver of copper—that their receipts were apt to form a very comfortable addition to unemployment pay.

Going yet a step further, a number of such amateur mendicants might—and in my Borough very often did—form themselves into a party, and with, for instance, musical instruments hired for the occasion, become a perambulating orchestra, announcing themselves as ex-Service men, starving Welsh miners or what not. I do not mean that they were necessarily impostors. Many, I have no doubt at all, were actually what they professed to be, though even in such cases it may be doubted whether better outlets for their energies might not have been found. In other cases they were no more genuine than had they been when as children they dressed up as Guy Fawkes on the Fifth of November. Before leaving an unsavoury subject,

I may quote one example which came to me at first hand. A friend, himself the manager of an important department of one of the largest businesses in the country, was greatly struck by the depressed and depressing aspect of a band of young men who, trailing along the gutter and singing mournful hymns most mournfully, announced themselves as starving Welsh miners. Feeling that any exertion was justified to assist such unfortunates, he took their names and addresses and the names of the Labour Exchanges to which they were attached, and set himself to find work for them. When he had secured possible employment for some, he wrote and otherwise tried to get in touch with them. Then it was that he discovered that all the names, addresses and other particulars given him were false.

Even to those who still had an old-fashioned prejudice against mendicancy, there were other pleasant adjuncts to unemployed pay. One young man, for instance, who lodged in the same house as did my unhappy friend Sergeant Curle, devoted his time to the lotteries promoted by many of the less scrupulous journals under the guise of "skill competitions," in prophesying football results, in cross-word puzzles and what not. His "dole" provided the sixpenny postal orders it was necessary in most cases to enclose with the solutions, and although I never heard that he secured any of the large prizes advertised, running in some cases into thousands of pounds, I at least know that he gave up any attempt to secure work in his own particular trade, that of a plumber.

Perhaps the worst feature of continued unemployment was that the sufferers, from being merely unemployed, sooner or later became unemployable. We all know, in our own persons, how easy it is to get out of the habit of work and how difficult to resume it. Given an employment of which you are not particularly fond, and the opportunity of a livelihood without it, it is scarcely to be surprised that some, sooner or later, gave up all idea of it. This quite apart from the inevitable loss of skill in hand or eye or brain that comes, atrophically, to the unemployed.

I do not wish to say that "workshyness"—as applied to hard or unpleasant work—was as universal as the pessimistic Mr. Harnett believed. Many, very many, of those who could find no work were honestly and desperately anxious to secure it; there were, during my stay in the Borough, many tragic little paragraphs in the Press reporting the suicide of someone who had failed and saw workless old age staring him in the face. Such dry rot—so to call it—as there was, had not then, at any rate, penetrated very deeply into the public will-to-work. And it was a fine tribute to the English of my Borough that with so many invitations and opportunities to become a mere charity-fed mob of parasites they—or such a great majority of them—did contrive to keep at once their sense of values and their personal dignity.

CHAPTER THE FIFTEENTH

THE WOMAN IN POSSESSION

Mr. Harnett and I left the Old English Garden after a slight difference of opinion, he remaining faithful to his love for dahlias, while I had allowed my wandering mind to be distracted by the fragrance of great masses of sweet peas still in their glory. Perhaps in reproof of such infidelity, Mr. Harnett was critically considering the inability of the younger generation to concentrate upon their work, when we became aware of a group of people on the grass slope stretching down to the Collingwood Gate. Some twenty young men were assembled round a speaker who, as was customary on such occasions, was elevated on a small portable rostrum. Above it waved a black banner, on which was inscribed, in silver letters, the intriguing words, " Inequality League."

It has long been the wise custom of successive British Governments to allow, even to encourage so long as traffic is not impeded, the holding of public meetings condemning every conceivable grievance, thus allowing enthusiasms which, pent up, might become explosive to dissipate themselves in the form of hot air. Romwell Park, as providing the widest space, was perhaps the most popular arena of the kind in my Borough, and I often attended the meetings,

smaller replicas of the famous gatherings in Hyde Park, to gain what wisdom I might from diametrically opposite arguments delivered at rival meetings coincidentally. The majority were, of course, organised affairs, supporting or condemning some political party or proposal with the arts of the professional propagandist. Religious speakers came next in numbers; while the "crank" half-way upon the road to lunacy was frequent and usually gained the largest audiences. Familiar as I was with them, the Inequality League was new to me, and I deftly shepherded Mr. Harnett, still declaiming, towards the group beneath the black banner.

Romwell Park mass-meetings were small, being composed, on an average, of one enthusiastic speaker, three fervent supporters, ten waverers, as many violent dissentients—not infrequently friends of the speaker, hoping to arouse some spark of active feeling in the passive waverers—and skirmishing parties of children, scoffers or idlers, welcome as wandering from one meeting to another and adding to their numbers. The Inequality meeting was smaller than most, boasting at the outside five earnest young men, as many young ladies, bound to them, I think, by the bonds of future matrimony, and a fringe of unattached children. Its purpose was to demand that men be given sex-equality before the Law.

I did not listen very long, because Mr. Harnett was impatient, but in that short time I heard several arguments, reasonably presented, that the laws of England bore unfairly upon the male sex. One, which I

happen to remember, voiced a protest against a man being forced to support his wife even in the not improbable contingency, as the speaker insisted, that she supplant him in his own job, by accepting a lower wage, and thus leave him unemployed.

I had not been very long in Romwell before I realised that sex problems had there an aspect altogether different from those of other countries, perhaps even of other parts of England. There was, for instance, real economic rivalry, not unmingled with bitterness on the part of the men, which I had not encountered elsewhere. It had little to do with the decision, then recently put into force, giving votes to women at the same age and on the same terms as to men.

By that time all the civilised nations excepting France, last stronghold of conservatism, had reached the same conclusion, and the result had been, as every thinking man had anticipated, that the belated act of justice had brought in its train neither the benefits nor the disasters presaged by enthusiasts. Being, as was not then generally realised even by themselves, very ordinary human beings, women, like other human beings, had registered their votes according to their individual opinions or, more often, prejudices. Because the majority of voters, male and female, belonged to the poorer class, they had in the majority voted for those professing most convincingly to champion that class, with the result that a Labour Administration was perched, rather precariously, at the head of affairs and seemed likely to remain so.

My Borough was not, however, really interested in

politics, as I have already pointed out, ranking low, in the percentage of voters making use of their votes, either male or female. And it was not against feminine enfranchisement that the young men of the Inequality League protested so hopelessly, but against certain pre-existing laws which, in their opinion, differentiated in things matrimonial against the husband and, in matters economic, against the male worker. Into such rights and wrongs it is not my place to enter; they serve to emphasise a phenomenon very much in evidence in Romwell—the superfluity of the male.

Shortly after the close of the European War it began generally to be realised by newspaper commentators that the population of England was unequally divided, the women being in an increasing majority. The tempting headline, " The Superfluous Woman," became a commonplace, above much wise consideration of the obvious problem, to find sufficient husbands to go round. In Romwell, as, I take it, in differing degrees throughout the country, the male sex was not only numerically the weaker, but bade fair to become an absolute superfluity, unnecessary either for conduct or governance. As Mr. Harnett more than once said bitterly, there was not a real man's job going in all my Borough. And, supposing that a real man's job necessitates exceptional qualities of strength or skill, of brain or brawn, he was not very far wrong.

I take it that road-breaking and the digging of sewers is very definitely a " man's job "—though it can be quite satisfactorily done by a machine. Leaving

that out of the question, it were hard to name any form of activity, necessary to the life of Romwell, which could not have been as satisfactorily carried on by a young woman as by a man in his prime. Apart from the very large number of workers employed in the City or the other Londons, who used Romwell only as a dormitory, the employment most in demand and locally considered the most desirable, from social and other reasons, was that of shop-keeper or assistant, and, although we have long grown accustomed to it, the spectacle of a man in the prime of life abasing himself to sell a packet of pins is not really inspiring and, as is more important, does not demand any specially masculine qualities. Small manufacturing industries, of which there were an increasing number in the Borough, provided work of an automatic, machine-watching description, for which women were really more capable than men, with a proportion of wrappers, packers and messengers. Municipal and Government employés, clerical or manual, Post Office workers, school teachers, clerks and secretaries; one could enlarge the list almost indefinitely without finding more than a small minority of occupations for which masculine capacities were imperatively required or which women were incapable of following. Where all were so law-abiding, even the duties of the police could be carried out more or less efficiently by women; while the last refuge of the male destitute, the Army, was frowned upon by a pacifist generation as a relic of barbarism.

Remembering that female workers commanded a

lower standard of wages, largely because of the competition of the "pin money" women who, being supported by fathers or husbands, were ready to accept rates of pay on which those fathers or husbands must have starved, it was not difficult to understand the resentment felt by the young men of the Inequality League against laws which seemed intended to emphasise the growing dominance of their sisters. But the superfluity of the male was evident in other directions also.

By that time, as one result of the revulsion of feeling resulting from the war, the whole spirit of the people was become definitely feminine. The disparity of numbers was greater in my Borough than elsewhere, perhaps, because the more enterprising of the remaining men, unable to compete with the growing army of girls, had been forced to look elsewhere for a living. External influences, such as the popular Press, were unanimous in their advocacy, avowed or tacit, of feminism and all that it implied. Even before the war writers and advertisers had begun to realise that women were "good copy," that in most families they held the purse-strings and that flattery, direct or indirect, was the most potent means of opening them. Education was very largely and increasingly in feminine hands; the wider spread of that education, inefficient though it might be in other directions, at least ensured that all the world should be able to read and write, and that its recipients should be more capable of self-expression than their parents; women, as the more voluble sex, had been quick to seize the

opportunity. Most potent of all such influences, a whole generation of the more masculine and enterprising of the young men had been exterminated in the war, leaving only the weaklings to succeed them. Their places were, in many, if not in most, cases taken by women ; it was no more than natural and right that those women, shouldering the weaklings aside, should inherit their slain brothers' places as moulders of public opinion. Whatever or however many the reasons, women held a more important place in the life of Romwell during the decade following the war than did men, and such public opinion as existed was definitely feminine.

The result was commendable or deplorable according to the point of view. Mr. Harnett, whom you will already have recognised for a woman-hater, was wont to declare, bitterly, that Romwell was no better than, in his own words, " a narum." (I have heard that he suffered considerable persecution at the hands of certain lady friends attracted by a deceptive rumour that he had large possessions.) Allowing for his prejudice, the simile was not altogether fantastic, in that it was possible to discover points in which the life of a dweller in Romwell approximated in some measure to that enjoyed by the inmates of an Oriental harem. It was, for instance, incredibly sheltered, as it would have seemed to the dwellers in some more individualistic age or country. From the cradle to the grave, the woman of Romwell was taught to look for protection, control and supervision to some intangible but all-powerful and all-jealous master (called the State),

who ordered and directed every detail of her life, paying for all and exacting in return unquestioning obedience. She was subjected to laws and regulations over which—except indeed nominally—she had no individual control and in most cases did not understand, exercised by an autocratic Civil Service —the Chief Eunuch of the Romwell harem. In case of difficulty or danger, she flocked for countenance and comfort to a Mother of the Maids, in the benevolent shape of a police magistrate; there was scarcely an accident or a predicament, physical, moral or mental, against which her zealous guardians had not provided. Above all, she was taught to reverence, to repeat continually, to murmur in her waking hours and to whisper in her sleep, one Law and one alone, "Safety First!"

However disconcerting to one who had lived most of his life amid unpleasantly muscular men, reared in the uncivilised tradition that "he shall take who has the power and he shall keep who can," there was much to be said for the Romwell philosophy, certain premises being granted. It made inevitably for gregariousness; originality was severely frowned upon; the first of public duties was to do as others did; but in a community where the standard of permissible achievement was avowedly that of the weakest vessel, who otherwise must be unfairly handicapped, gregariousness was as necessary as it was desirable. It might be said to set the rabbit above the lion; but a community of rabbits is undoubtedly the easiest for which to legislate; lions are always uncomfortable

creatures to deal with. That "community spirit" which entailed a perpetual surveillance into and interference with the most intimate details of existence might lead to *sotto voce* grumblings; at least dissent would be frowned upon by public opinion. Human life being accepted as the most precious of possessions, the risking of it was very properly regarded as the most odious of crimes; a quarrel must never be carried further than verbal recrimination; a bout of fisticuffs must be regarded as an offence more serious than the meanest form of petty larceny or the destruction of a dozen reputations by garden gossip. A Harry of Monmouth, a Drake, a Frobisher, a Palmerston, might have rubbed their eyes disparagingly had they found themselves unexpectedly in post-war Romwell, but, after all, they have been dead a very long time!

Against a public opinion moulded on such strait lines, it was hopeless for the young men of the Inequality League, few in numbers, held in little regard, slow of expression, betrayed by their very sex-instincts, to protest with any hope of a hearing. Definitely feminine and feminist Romwell had become, and, failing some world upheaval, bade fair to remain so. This all the more because neither the men nor the women were consciously aware of any change. Because they had always faced the realities of life more directly than had their sheltered sisters of the middle class, Mrs. Mellon and Mrs. Thwaites were dowered with an instinctive common-sense denied to them. It never occurred to them to protest their equality with men; it had never occurred to them to doubt it. That assertive zeal and zealous self-assertiveness which

was then so characteristic of the women—and especially the middle-aged women—of leisure, was lacking in them. They had—and knew that they had—their "job in life" to do; the best way of doing it, they instinctively realised, was to get ahead with it and leave discussion of their "rights" to others. I can think of no higher or more deserved tribute to the women of Romwell than that, unlike so many of their more fortunate sisters, they realised that their duties as human beings came before their rights as women.

Realising realities as they did, it was no more than natural that the people of my Borough, men and women alike, had forgotten, if they ever accepted, a number of pretty but unsound conventional beliefs still cherished in other countries, if not in the other Londons also. The pleasant fiction, natural in an age or a country of masculine dominance, that women are creatures of a finer clay, a purer soul and a nobler conscience than their brothers, was never heard in Romwell. The allied and even quainter convention that women be regarded as the "fair" sex went unhonoured, even before changing conditions freed the feminine body from the clinging and clogging draperies that elsewhere lent it an illusive beauty. So fared it with "feminine charm," "womanly intuition," "woman's power for influencing men's lives," "feminine self-sacrifice," and the rest of the conventions of an older generation, and with them "masculine chivalry," this last the more unfortunately because, although women may never at the best of times have benefited from it very materially, at least it was an excellent school of self-sacrifice for men.

It is not for the mere passer-by to dogmatise ; at least to one such it appeared that the women of Romwell regarded themselves and were regarded by their fellow-men with a more nearly intelligent appreciation than prevailed in any other country or class of society with which he was familiar. And, to the observant butterfly, unconscious of the spear-points torturing his brother toad, the study of a phase of sex-relationship so unusual was full of fascination. Especially interesting was it to observe how, in matters of courtship and matrimony, the male and female had resumed their natural but forgotten relationship, the woman being quite frankly the hunter, the man, as frankly, the reluctant prey.

It is a very old truism that the woman, preferring the solid comfort of an " establishment " to the rosiest raptures of passion, has always desired the sex-relationship to be permanent, while the man, having to provide that establishment, has been as anxious that the pastime of the moment do not develop into a lifetime of monotonous and expensive matrimony. Not in the least—or most—progressive country known to me have I ever heard both parties to the bargain express their respective desires so frankly as in Romwell. Lettuce Mellon, for instance, who was an extremely nice girl, would descant, with a frankness altogether disconcerting to one of a more hypocritical convention, on the difficulties a girl must face in finding a husband, and how far it is safe for her to go in leading the young man on towards that end. Charley Wilson, who was as decent a young man as I have known, and as anxious as Lettuce herself for

the joys of matrimony, would yet express himself with the most cynical frankness as to the wiles employed by young women to tempt his like into the net, and for that matter, as to the efforts of the young men to obtain sexual gratification without having to pay too dearly for it.

The young woman's desire for matrimony was only partly the outcome of her natural instincts ; to some extent at least it was economic and irrespective of any change in the relative precedence of the sexes. Whatever her rights—and she had been taught to acknowledge no duties—of franchise or citizenship, she was wisely determined not to forgo the obvious advantages of having a man to work for her and support her ; the young man, faced by the increasing difficulty of supporting even himself in comfort, was as determined to disappoint her. Curiously enough, a strong prejudice still persisted against the wife " going out to work," with which the husband, intent upon those domestic comforts for which he had paid so dearly, was in entire agreement. As limiting the opportunities of employment open to those really in need of it and too often resulting in that unhappiest of created beings, the parasite husband, such prejudice was amply justified. In too many cases, if I might judge from the current comment of the " quartier," the young husband, having once experienced the luxury of having an unpaid servant to work for him, deliberately embraced permanent unemployment, with deplorable results both to himself and his family. As though to balance this, that same current opinion, which I register for what it was worth, voiced as it was by a

local clergyman on whose judgment I placed some reliance, held that it was not infrequent for young women of the less scrupulous kind deliberately to entrap young men into matrimony, with the intention of obtaining a separation order against them at the first real or manufactured opportunity, whereby at once to be delivered of an incubus and provided with an income for life. A magistrate's clerk, whom I consulted on this point, assured me, however, that were such a programme actually entertained, it would be in most cases foredoomed to failure, careful enquiry into the facts being made before such separation orders were granted.

Of the comparative happiness of marriages under the New Order of things I cannot speak, save to recall that unhappiness is very much more vocal than contentment, and that for one unsuccessful marriage of which we hear, there are probably fifty successful of which we know nothing. To which I might add that the practical common-sense of Romwell adapts itself very much more quickly to the inevitable than is the case in more romantic communities. Mrs. Wolsey, indeed, provided me with the frankest commentary on the married life of Romwell. She was much interested in some fashionable divorce scandal in one of the other Londons, and, referring to it in passing, went on to consider divorce in general, with which, she said, she did not hold, and for which people like herself had neither the time nor the money. She added that she was one of the lucky ones, for although her first husband had been an unpleasant incident of life, her second was as good as you need expect. " But,"

she concluded, "whatever he did, I don't think I *could* risk another one, come to that."

In her campaigns towards matrimony the young woman of Romwell had to contend against many disabilities. Her small means and the need, in most cases, of earning her own living deprived her of much of the leisure and the more expensive artificial aids to beauty which she might otherwise devote to the enslavement of the impressionable male. Even the opportunities of courtship were limited, owing to the overcrowded conditions under which she lived and the universal lack of privacy. One of the most frequent—and pathetic—spectacles of Romwell life was that of enamoured couples uncomfortably perched like so many sparrows on the benches in Romwell Park, or wherever else public seats were to be found, endeavouring to lose in the rosy mists of Romance the two or three other couples similarly occupied on the same bench.

Another curious result of the changed relationship was the tendency towards sex-segregation, especially on the part of the young men. Naturally shyer than the girls, perhaps a shade resentful of the haughtier social claims which they owed to their cinematographic studies, the youth of Romwell were unexpectedly irresponsive to the eager advances of young women in search of Romance. This was the more marked as the young women, profiting by the relaxation in the conventions governing the intercourse of the sexes, naturally more adventurous and more interested in amorous adventure, failed to realise the male instinct (from which, more than from any idea of sex-

superiority, the harem system probably originated) to prefer the company of its own kind. They asserted their desire—if not, as did their more leisured sisters, their right—to join, even to vie with, their brothers on every possible occasion of sport, work, or leisure, so that, as I once heard a young man declare, with more bitterness than elegance, it had become impossible to escape from them anywhere but in a public lavatory. Owing, I suppose, partly to this and partly to the actual lack of available young men, numbers of the younger women had scarcely any opportunity of dealings with the other sex, save with the members of their own families. Nun-like in all but vocation, they trooped, in twos or threes, to and from their work; they attended public entertainments without a thought of what used to be called "male escort"; even in the public dancing halls, where there seemed no lack of possible partners, it was the custom rather than the exception for young girls to be seen dancing together with every appearance of enjoyment.

An attractive little person was the working girl of Romwell, quite as much so as that Paris midinette, who, owing to the strange mirage with which the very word Paris is enveloped in the Anglo-Saxon mind, has been dowered with such romantic charm by her admirers. Self-respecting, industrious, as cheerful as a sparrow and as combative, until the yearning for Romance obsessed her and she grew appropriately pensive, upon her slim shoulders rested all that was engaging in the life of Romwell, and I shall not soon lose the vision of her neat figure, tittupping to and from her work in shop or office or warehouse, on

heels much too high for her, her scanty skirts giving her pink-clad legs a prominence altogether disproportionate; hurrying always in groups of two or three, chattering and twittering like a flight of linnets, as engaging a little featherhead as you will meet this side of Fairyland.

Beautiful, even pretty, she was seldom, in any accepted sense of the words; the circumstances of her birth and environment rendered it impossible. Her head was often too large for her frail body; her features were seldom regular; she was naturally rather than fashionably over-thin and under-developed; her complexion was of a vellum-like pallor, which yet was not without its charm when left unmarred by unskilful use of cosmetics. Her pleasant little voice was characteristic of her, though indeed the English voice, at all ages and in both sexes, has a pleasant softness lacking in other nations, so that, on returning home, after a long sojourn abroad, I have often found myself wondering, unthinkingly, why all the world should speak in whispers! Her whole physical suggestion was one of such dainty frailty that it seemed whole bevies of her must be blown away, like so many cobwebs, by the first gust of wind. How a little creature so delicate could, not only survive life's hardships, but develop into a woman so vast, so rubicund and so shapeless as a Mrs. Mellon or a Mrs. Wolsey remained to me an enduring mystery.

Her standard of taste in dress and ornament, thanks to the cinema and the popular fashion paper, was strikingly higher than that of preceding generations, and was in nothing below that of her prototypes in

Paris or New York. Intellectual, even studious, she was not, save of romantic fiction ; an optimist to the core, she regarded life as something to be enjoyed for the moment without care for the future—which she could rely upon an increasingly motherly Administration to safeguard. Avid of amusement, agog for Romance, the more innocent of the world because she was so close to its realities, she was very much more contented than her sister of the leisured class, because, knowing and recking nothing of the clamour of zealous feminists, her interests were not confined to her own emotions or her own importance, while she had already much of the instinctive common-sense so characteristic of the older women of her kind. How far she suffered from that exaggerated consciousness of sex which was the first result of feminine emancipation, how far her standards of morality were affected by the too public and too frequent discussion in the cheaper Press and nastier fiction of the time of such subjects as Divorce, Free Love or Birth Control, we need not here consider.

That Romwell was, not unreasonably, a matriarchy in all but name was suggested by the growing parity in the physique of the sexes. Its most obvious cause was the gap left by the extermination of so many of the young men of superior physique in the European War, coupled perhaps with the few calls for exceptional effort of a physical kind made upon those who had to take their place. Certainly to the stranger, watching the passers-by in one of the busy Romwell streets, it came as a frequent surprise that there was so little to choose, in such matters as height, muscular

development or breadth of shoulder, between men and women; in such suggestions of physical and mental energy as could be caught from carriage, complexion or facial expression, the comparison was even more favourable to what is, in other countries and climates, rightly called the weaker sex.

Such an impression could, of course, be dangerously deceptive, and so far as it was to be trusted, might be based rather upon the improvement in feminine physique than in any deterioration of the masculine. Such young men as Charley Wilson, or Mr. Andrews, of the egg shop, were as pleasantly representative of the youth of their generation as were, before them, their fathers or elder brothers who wrought miracles during the European War, physically and mentally as capable of carrying on the proud traditions of the English.

All the same, Romwell, as it seemed to the sympathetic eye, was no longer the place for, what in America prefers to be called a "he man," his one obvious sphere of action being the screen of the cinema. Indeed, in any Pageant of the Peoples, in which my Borough might have been called upon to share, male symbols or representatives would have seemed as out of place for her as mail-clad knights at a young ladies' prize-giving. Rather should her banners have been displayed above an army of slim, young, kilted, *amorinæ*, hurrying forward in ordered disarray, chattering together as they went, so that the sound of their voices should be as of a cloud of starlings nesting at eventide in the tall elms of Romwell Park.

CHAPTER THE SIXTEENTH

BENDING THE TWIG

I WAS standing at the corner of Barnard's Grove, talking to Mr. Swain, the builder. I had been wishing to see him, to arrange for a visit to the new houses he was building in Manor Way, and meeting him accidentally, accosted him. It was not a fortunate meeting, for he had just escaped miraculously from under the very wheel of a motor cycle which, without warning, had turned in from the High Road at forty miles an hour, making a noise like a battery of machine-guns, to the evident gratification of its grinning rider.

Mr. Swain was still telling me what he thought of motor cyclists when there came a new clattering of wheels upon the pavement, as a flight of boys, averaging, I suppose, nine years of age, rushed round the same corner, mounted on home-made "scooters"—an instrument of torture then in great favour with the infantry of Romwell, consisting of a narrow wooden platform arranged over two metal wheels, which the driver propelled with one foot while he steered with the other. There were six of them, racing in line, and as there was obviously no room for them to pass, I hastily stepped back into the roadway, just escaping a passing lorry, to give them passage. Mr. Swain, whose back had been turned to them, was less fortunate.

Two collided with him, barking his shins severely, and he only escaped a severe fall by clutching at a neighbouring lamp post, while the attacking party vanished with a rattling of wheels and shouts of victory. When I left him, Mr. Swain was still telling me what he thought of children.

Children, especially other people's children, were not popular in my Borough; save for the Council Schools, they might very well have been the victims of some new Herodian massacre. But whatever might have been said in detriment of the educational methods considered appropriate by the London County Council, they were at least agreeable to the wishes of parents. As Mrs. Mellon put it, more than once, "It keeps them out of mischief." A more pessimistic friend echoed, "The only peace I get is when they are at school." Apart from such interested considerations, the mothers of Romwell were not remarkable for the interest they showed in their children's education.

You must, I think, study a community where practically everyone lives in somebody else's house to understand the drawbacks attached to parenthood under the New Order. Children were by far the greatest complication of the housing problem. Did you study the advertisements of rooms, flats or "apartments" to let anywhere in the district, you found that they almost invariably contained some such stipulation as "Not suitable for children," "For Adults only," or "No children, pets, or musical instruments." Despite her own commitments, Mrs. Mellon invariably rejected applicants with "encum-

brances," and went so far as to give notice to an otherwise unexceptionable young couple as soon as it became evident that they were about to have a child. Mrs. Thwaites said quite frankly that she would rather have a houseful of parrots than one baby. Mr. Swain, who had three daughters—but you know already what Mr. Swain thought of children.

The responsibility for their unpopularity rested, it is true, rather upon their parents and the responsible authorities than upon their own small shoulders, save perhaps in arriving into an inhospitable world in such large numbers. Not only was little provision made for them—or possible to make for them—but their mothers were faced by difficulties such as made almost insuperably against efficient motherhood.

I heard many aspersions upon the mothers of Romwell and their ignorance of their craft, their severest critics being their neighbours. Myself unqualified to judge, I could only agree that the results, as publicly in evidence, were not entirely reassuring. Their offspring were very much worse mannered than those of women of the same social level in Paris, Berlin or Rome; they were inferior in physique to their prototypes in New York or Melbourne. But the conditions were so different as to be barely comparable. The Frenchwoman had a smaller family, the American or Australian a larger income, a more progressive environment and, in either case, a different tradition. Were a French woman to allow her children to run wild on the streets with no attempt at parental supervision, she

would be outlawed by her "quartier," as would a woman of New York, Jewish or Gentile, who made no attempt to study the craft of motherhood before bringing children into the world.

In Romwell, lacking such traditions, maternity was usually embarked upon by those who knew—and could know—less than nothing about it, which could be said, I think, of no other skilled profession in the world, save, of course, Literature. The prenatal education of the Romwell mother ran somewhat as follows. From her own birth overcrowded, once out of her cradle she was compelled (in the intervals of attendance at a school where, through lack of means of enforcing discipline, she learned little more than to spell out a penny love story or to write a misspelt letter in an ill-formed hand), in the absence of a home-nursery, to run wild about the streets. At the earliest permitted age she was hurried into monotonous employment in office or shop or factory at rates of pay and with prospects of advancement suited to her capacities. To escape it, all her energies were devoted to finding a husband who should rescue her from such monotonous serfdom, recking little that home-serfdom may be the most monotonous of all. Little wonder that her offspring lacked those engaging qualities so evident in cherubs and the children of domestic fiction.

There were lighter shades to the picture. Not all the children of Romwell were badly brought up; not all the mothers were ignorant or indolent. To the girl proof against her environment and sufficiently

old-fashioned to regard her marriage as a sacrament, public and private agencies were alike ready and eager to extend a hand. She might attend pre-natal clinics, classes for instruction in motherhood, domestic economy, cooking. Evening institutes, welfare centres, after-care committees, were zealous in her service. But to accept such help, voluntary or official, was not and could not be made compulsory upon her. Worn out by her day's work, domestic or otherwise, it might be difficult if not impossible for her to attend such classes or, attending, to grasp what they strove to teach. Too often, as her would-be helpers admitted, it was necessary to bribe her into attending, and her attendance once secured, to give it more significance than the excuse for a cup of tea and a gossip.

It could not be said that the authorities failed in their duty towards their wards. Nowhere else in the world were more opportunities open to the children of the poor to continue their education after the school age, to attend secondary schools, to win university scholarships, to start their active life as little handicapped as their richer competitors. But, their superior quickness aiding them, too often, as I was told, these advantages were seized by young Jews, Russians or other children of alien strains—as was their undoubted right—and so it was with the not infrequent opportunities provided by the Government, City Companies or private enterprise to learn skilled trades. Those most in need of them ignored them, leaving them to others for whom they were not primarily intended.

It was in the matter of discipline that the mothers of Romwell showed themselves least intelligent. Themselves of a generation which, as a natural result of the war, suffered an instinctive revulsion against any overt act of compulsion, swayed by that pride of possession instinct in every woman and too often, in Romwell, finding its only outlet in their children, not only was home discipline lax; attempts to supplement it from without were fiercely resented. At home the child was bewildered by consistent inconsistency, soundly smacked at one moment for what it might be caressed for doing the moment after; supported against any aggression from without while subjected to capricious injustice, according to the parent's state of temper, from within. In the schools, discipline was no less difficult of enforcement. Did a teacher punish a child for some intolerable offence, the odds were that he or she would shortly be confronted by a screaming virago or, as was worse in its effect upon their after-careers, haled before a magistrate on a charge of aggravated assault.

The streets, upon which the children were driven in hordes by tired mothers seeking a few moments' peace, were, in fact, their only school of discipline. There, at infrequent intervals, some private citizen might be goaded to visit upon them summary punishment better inflicted by their parents; there, all too frequently, they suffered the more dreadful penalty of being crushed beneath some vehicle as they dashed with the carelessness of childhood across its path. Attempts to keep them off the streets were many and,

in the absence of parental co-operation, unsuccessful. Philanthropists appealed for more parks and playing-grounds ; the children regarded them as mistrustfully as the schools—or more so. In the playing-field they were—and knew that they were—subject to some form of discipline ; in the streets they need fear nothing but a careless fate. About the time of which I write the famous " Foundling " was removed to the country and its unoccupied grounds temporarily adapted as a playing-ground for the children of the neighbourhood. Adults, well-meaning if not very imaginative, were delighted. Eager helpers volunteered to direct the children's games. The children regarded them with dark suspicion. One little band of happy, dirty adventurers was noticed by a friend disporting themselves upon a neighbouring pavement, varying the monotony by occasionally dashing into the roadway under the mudguards of passing traffic. Asked why they did not go into the Foundling gardens, where they could play in safety, they answered with a charming frankness, " Too much teacher ! " It was hard not to sympathise with them.

Having had opportunities to realise the place which discipline, public and domestic, took in the life of other countries, as, for instance, Germany at that time, I found myself somewhat at a loss to realise how entirely—and purposefully—it was ignored in Romwell. And, as a scalpel wherewith to lay bare their ideas on the subject, I more than once related to Romwell mothers a story of life in Japan as it was told me by a friend who lived there for several years. It ran as

follows. On the high road in a lonely agricultural district, several miles from the nearest village, my friend encountered two small children, walking hand in hand and crying as they walked. She asked what was the matter and whether she could help. Between tears, one of them told her that they had come from Suchatown and were on their way to Such-another. "But it is ten miles from Suchatown!" cried my astonished friend. "Have you come on foot?" "Yes, we have come on foot." "And—it is another ten to Suchanother. Are you not tired?" "Yes—we have often rested by the way and kind people have given us food—but we are very tired." "And frightened?" "Yes. We are very frightened." "But—why in the world are you doing such a thing? Who sent you?" "Our father sent us." "But why?" "We do not know why. He told us that we should be very tired and very frightened, but that we must go because he told us to go. So we have come." And with the politeness inbred in the children of Nippon they bade her solemn farewells and, hand in hand, proceeded on their journey.

When I asked the mothers of Romwell what they thought of the father of Nippon their replies were unanimous. He was a brute, a savage, a barbarian; they would like to be able to tell him what they thought of him and of his wife for allowing it. It was no more than you could expect from a lot of black savages. None showed any conception of the value placed by the wise people of the East upon discipline as a weapon—perhaps the most reliable weapon of all—

against the dangers of human life. I often wondered, walking through the streets of Romwell, whether the curious vagueness of so many of the passing faces, giving them the suggestion of unfinished sketches in which the features were not completed, might not result from this impatience of discipline and the growing disregard of it in the upbringing of the children, with its consequent lack of self-control in later life. Of all the dangers England may have to face in the years to come, I am not sure that this be not the greatest.

I am reminded of little Paul. He was the small son, aged six, of Mr. Bob Patten, the merchant-prince of Juniper Street. Mr. Patten, because he had been in his time a Gentleman's Gentleman, was in many things wiser than his neighbours. He had but one child, for instance. That child he brought up in comparative seclusion, refusing him the chance of running wild in the streets, himself taking him to school and fetching him away from it, even to the detriment of his business. He showed himself again —or so I believed until the incident I am about to relate—braver as well as wiser than the commonalty, for he did not fear to inflict the *argumentum ad hominem* when he felt that little Paul deserved it. This, perhaps due to his knowledge of the penalties incurred in the great public schools by the sons of his former employer, was in its way heroic. As a contrast to what we are told of former generations, so fiercely was public opinion, buttressed upon the activities of various excellent societies for the prevention of cruelty, set against any revival of the proverb that

entails the use of the rod rather than the spoiling of the child, that the Romwell father, like the Romwell schoolmistress, feared to raise his hand against even the most unruly child, lest he be straightway dragged before a magistrate and held up to public execration as a horrid example of brutality.

Little Paul Patten, thirsting for forbidden joys, played truant, not from school, but from the parental hearth. I happened to be in the shop at the moment he crept very quietly through the open door, hoping to slip past Justice under cover of the counter. His father was too quick for him, and in a level voice, without any trace of temper, told him that he must then and there be punished. As he spoke he took one of the penny rulers that were part of his stock-in-trade and admirably adapted for the tickling of small pink palms. The culprit was not unduly alarmed. Raising a pair of confiding dark blue eyes, oddly contrasting with surrounding dirt, he regarded the Executioner, while stretching upwards the hand that was to suffer. "You wouldn't hurt your little boy, would you, Daddy dear?" he lisped, with a smile that was, I fear, more triumphant than apprehensive.

Discipline frowned uncertainly. Then, with a sudden gesture, the penny ruler was flung back to its place on the shelves. "Go to your mother and tell her to punish you," said Mr. Patten with a horrid ferocity, motioning to the door which led into the little parlour.

I expect Mr. Patten was not the only Spartan father in Romwell.

CHAPTER THE SEVENTEENTH

THE RED HAND

"ARE you a gentleman? And brave?"

I was having tea at Benyon's in the High Road. I usually had tea at Benyon's because it was one of the very few teashops—actually it called itself a restaurant as well and offered you other meals—which was of Romwell, as contrasted with the many branches of great multiple firms scattered about the district which were exactly like all the other branches in all the other Londons. Benyon's claimed, I have no doubt truly, to have been founded in the 'forties of the last century; it still styled itself, on various ancient signboards, "pastrycook and confectioner"; it undoubtedly owed its enduring popularity to the possession of a wine licence. If you were a Mrs. Thwaites, or even a Lady Peck, feeling it beneath your dignity to enter the new Saloon Lounge of the "Grey Mare," but needing a stimulant in the intervals of shopping, you very frequently dropped into Benyon's for "tea," which took the form in most instances of a glass—or two—of the sweetest possible port, or, if you desired nourishment, of stout. In all my experience I only twice saw men drink anything but tea at Benyon's, and they were frowned upon as intruders by every matron then present. I have been fascinated by the

rashness of stout middle-aged ladies who would drink, upon my honour, three glasses of stout on end and wash them down with as many chocolate éclairs.

Of a retiring frontage, Benyon's had ample public space, upholstered in old-fashioned, rather dust-eaten red velvet, with curious glass cupboards in which lurked silver epergnes and candlesticks hoarded from an earlier period and shady nooks beneath stairs and in corners where any matron, so preferring, could drink her stout or sherry unobserved. Benyon's gave really good tea to those who asked for it and a sufficiency of butter on your toast, and I was taking tea there one afternoon when I heard the words, "Are you a gentleman? And brave?"

I had taken my usual seat, on the velvet settee beneath the window furthest from the entrance and, as I was reading a book of some interest, I took little note of my surroundings, save when I asked for a second helping of toast. But hearing myself thus dramatically addressed I raised my eyes from my book, to find that a young woman had taken the chair on the other side of the marble table and was regarding me with eager interest.

What followed struck me at the time as so unusual and as so illustrative of the "double lives," so to put it, enjoyed by many of the young women of Romwell, that I set down the facts in the shape of a short story. Knowing that many people prefer that fact be rendered more credible by being presented as fiction, I have recovered the story and here reprint it as I wrote it at the time. The character of Stokes is, of course,

imaginary; the rest varies scarcely at all from the facts as I even now remember them. I called the story "The Red Hand"—and this is it.

"The Red Hand"

"Are you a gentleman?"

Stokes started out of a day-dream and stared at the girl on the other side of the marble-topped table. She was leaning over towards him, eagerness in her every feature. She repeated, in an excited whisper, "Are you a gentleman? And brave?"

She was in no sense remarkable in appearance, or otherwise interesting—a pale, flat-chested young person, dressed in a brown blanket-coat beginning to be the least bit shiny at the seams and a little round hat with a tarnished buckle and onion-coloured silk stockings that were not made of silk. She held in her hand a leather bag that Stokes' technical knowledge told him had cost three and eleven-three when it was new and, by a coincidence, a copy of the same magazine he had been reading. Certainly there was nothing of the Heroine of Romance about her.

Stokes stared at her blankly, doubting if he had heard aright. He had, for that matter, no idea what to answer. The word "gentleman" admits of so many definitions; as to bravery, like the rest of us Stokes felt capable of any necessary heroism if called upon, but admitted that he had never yet been called upon to translate theory into practice.

Even as he stared the girl rose to her feet, with a

hurried, "If you are, you will follow me at once," and went out of the tea-shop.

Stokes did not follow her at once. He had not finished his portion of buttered toast for one thing; for another, as he reminded himself, he had not lived for two years in London for nothing.

It may have been ten minutes before he paid his bill and went out, to find the girl looking into the window of the tobacconist next door, evidently awaiting him. "You have come," she said. "It is good of you."

He had no time to protest. "Pretend you only stopped to look into this window," she whispered. "We may be watched."

"But—I say, you know."

"Hush—speak lower! There is danger all around us."

Again he tried to remonstrate, and again she interrupted him. "You must follow me—without seeming to. Keep at least fifty yards behind me. When I go into the house, wait at the street corner until you see me pull up the blind. Then come straight up the steps and enter. I will leave the door open. After that—we can only hope——"

"I'm sorry—but I've got to——"

"Oh—please—please. You do not know how much depends upon it. Life and Death and more—a woman's honour. I beg you—I beg you——"

"Why not ask a policeman?" he was beginning, but he was too late. She had left him and was hurrying across the road, glancing apprehensively back across her shoulder.

At that time, as it happened, Stokes was balancing in his mind the relative advantages of a Life of Crime and of an assistant-managership—as he preferred to call it—in the Fancy Leather Goods Department of Bentley and Ferguson's in the Romwell High Road. He had, and he realised that he had, little actual vocation for the life criminal, more particularly if it entailed actual violence or bloodshed, for he was of poor physique, and, perhaps because his boyhood had been passed under the shadow of the Great War, was constitutionally nervous. On the other hand, he did not feel that his occupation offered any great prospects of the Realities, and a story, dealing with the adventures of a notorious adventurer, which he had just been reading in one of the popular magazines, filled him with vague longings for some career, richer and fuller, even if less respectable, than that of inducing young ladies and old to purchase unwanted vanity bags or purses.

It was a Thursday afternoon—early-closing day at Bentley and Ferguson's—and Stokes had been considering a visit to the Talkies. There was a film of more than usual excellence at the Imperial that week, "The Blood Trail," featuring Saul Seaton and Mary Dearlove with their trained Lion Ba-Ba. If he did not go at once he would be too late to get a seat. On the other hand—after all, the girl had appealed to him as a gentleman and brave.

On the other side of the main road, at a turning, the girl stopped for a minute, evidently with the idea that Stokes should make no mistake. It was, when he

reached it, a shabby street, lined with poor shops and presenting a stolid front of that respectability which is more depressing than actual poverty. Half-way along it the girl turned off, to the left, along an even shabbier, narrower, darker street. Stokes was careful to note the name—Andover Street. As he came to the corner the girl was already mounting the steps of a desolate house some twenty yards away. There were Nottingham lace curtains in the bow window, but it had a deserted air, and as it seemed to Stokes, something menacing in its suggestion.

As he hesitated, uncertain what to do, the girl opened the door, waved a cautious hand in his direction, and disappeared into the house. Even the sanest of us loses his mental balance at times. Stokes, although every cautious nerve in his body urged it, did not make all speed back towards civilisation and the Romwell High Road. Instead he hesitated for a few minutes, and coming to a definite resolution, strolled past the house at the corner on the other side of the road. Passing one of the rare lamp-posts, he was aware of a young man standing beneath it who favoured him with a malevolent stare. He was, as it seemed to Stokes, of the criminal class, narrow-chested, pimply, flashily dressed, with a pink flower of some kind in his buttonhole. Something like a cold hand gripped at Stokes' heart at the thought that he was actually in the presence of that Underworld which had seemed so enthralling viewed between the pages of a magazine. He remembered that it was even then not too late—that he had but to retrace his steps.

Having come to a cross road, he turned and sauntered back. The young man had disappeared; the centre blind of the bow-window in the sinister house was raised, and the silhouette of the girl's figure showed against the darkness within. It was already growing dusk in the street, but there were no lights visible anywhere in the house. Stokes hesitated for a moment, and before he had come to a decision, the door opened and the girl appeared, beckoning to him to hasten. There seemed nothing for it but to obey. As he did so, he heard a shrill whistle of the kind the street arab emits mysteriously by thrusting his fingers down his throat. It seemed to come from somewhere in the street behind him, and he mentally associated it with the young man of the lamp-post.

As the front door closed behind him, Stokes found himself in semi-darkness, the only audible sound being the rustling of the girl's skirts as she preceded him.

"Quick—quick!" came from the gloom, and a door handle rattled to the right. He followed the girl into a small front room, the blinds already drawn, dimly lit by a single candle. It was comfortable and commonplace enough, crowded with furniture and nicknacks of the antimacassar age, such as are generally extinct even in shabby genteeldom. On a table in the centre of the room was a flat leather case, filled, or nearly so, with something that glittered brightly even in the pale candle-light.

As Stokes gazed at it there came a thunderous rapping at the outer door, a succession of single knocks

that made the very house tremble. As if in answer, the girl extinguished the candle, and her hand groped for that of Stokes in the semi-darkness. "Come," she whispered. "It is our only chance."

Willy-nilly he followed the guidance of the hand into the front passage, along it, away from the door on which the knocking still resounded, down a bare wooden staircase and so through some kind of a room paved with stone—a scullery, as he supposed—to a door which gave upon a small backyard.

In contrast to the darkness he had just left, it was not difficult to see about him. There was nothing that spoke of Romance in the yard, some planks heaped in a corner, a couple of posts with lines across them, evidently intended for clothes-drying, the stump of a small tree, long dead, in the angle of the house, a small door in the further wall.

The girl stood like a statue, finger on lip, listening intently. "Are you armed?" she asked suddenly.

"I've got my walking stick," he answered. It was only a plain cherry-wood stick, with a silver mount, not at all adapted for desperate adventures, but you cannot be expected to carry an automatic in the Romwell High Road on a Thursday afternoon.

"Then take this. You may need it." She thrust into his hand what felt like a revolver, though he was too agitated to regard it more closely. "And this." Realising that it was the leather case he had seen on the table, he hesitated. "Please—they must be saved!" she insisted breathlessly. "Whatever happens to me!"

"If only you would tell me what it all means," he began.

She drew him forward, clutching at his elbow, towards the little door in the wall. "Fool—I am a fool to have waited so long," she cried. "If they have thought—it may already be too late. Quickly! Quickly!"

Stokes, beginning to find himself infected by her terrors, followed her without further protest. The door opened upon a sort of brick-lined alley between two rows of houses. Fifty yards from the end it turned at right angles, opening at last, under an archway into a thoroughfare, whether Andover Street or another Stokes had no means of knowing.

Even as they emerged from under the deeper shadow of the archway, there was a clatter of heavy boots, and a man, who must have been waiting in the roadway, charged headlong at Stokes. So great was his haste that before he could reach his goal he slipped on the edge of the kerb, and instinctively throwing out his hands to save himself, dived, as it were, headlong. Stokes, who with a similar instinct of self-preservation, had thrust out his hand before him, though he was too startled to have any idea of forcible resistance, felt something hard impinge upon his knuckles. The shock made him stagger back, whence perhaps it was that his aggressor shot past him, stumbled, fell to the ground, and there lay still.

Only vaguely conscious of what had happened, the victor was about to approach the fallen foe, to satisfy himself that he was not seriously hurt, when the girl

caught at his arm. "Come!" she hissed. "There are others! Come—before it is too late!"

Stokes, dimly conscious that two other men were coming along the street, resigned himself to her guidance. Gradually it was dawning upon him that he—or the kerbstone for him—had won a glorious victory. It was clear that he had administered a knock-out blow without knowing it. A thrill of pride passed through him with the realisation. "I don't think we need fear any further attacks," he said, as clearly as his lack of breath would allow.

They had reached the corner of another cross street as he spoke. The girl stopped suddenly. "You—you don't think you hurt him?" she asked apprehensively.

"I shouldn't wonder if I had killed him," said Stokes proudly, but not without a certain misgiving on his side, for a quick vision came to him of his own hands in the handcuffs of a murderer.

"Killed him!" she exclaimed in accents of horror. "Oh—I must go back. I must go back."

"I hit pretty hard," he returned, still between pride and fear. Even as he spoke he felt a certain annoyance rise within him. It seemed singularly ungrateful of the girl to propose to desert him just when the adventure had ended so prosperously. "I suppose there is no need for me to come with you," he said with a shade of hauteur. "Here is your property, if you will be good enough to take it." He offered her the leather case and the revolver with a bow.

"No—no," she cried, putting her hand to her forehead. "It would be madness. We must go on—at

once." And then with a promise of tears in her voice. "Oh, I *do* hope you didn't hurt him. I had no idea you were so strong."

Go on they did, she clinging to his arm and directing him through a maze of dark streets, growing steadily shabbier, twisting and turning so frequently and with so many backward feints to make sure they were not followed, that although he had lived for two years in the neighbourhood, he lost all sense of their direction until they unexpectedly emerged into a main thoroughfare which proved to be the Romwell Road.

"And now," said Stokes, as they turned the corner, "we are not likely to be attacked here. So perhaps you wouldn't mind telling me——"

"But we are not safe yet—not at all safe," she stammered. "There are—oh, hundreds of them. We must go on—we must go on!"

A tramcar dashed past, and Stokes considered whether to go to the next stopping place and wait for another. But at the same moment a stray taxi—a rare phenomenon in that district—approached them through the gathering gloom, and on an impulse, remembering how she had at first appealed to him as a gentleman, he signalled to it. "We will drive somewhere," he said with some inward pride, secure in the knowledge that he had still thirty shillings of his last week's salary in his pocket. "And you can tell me all about it."

"But—but—a taxi," she protested with a note of awe and admiration in her voice. "It is so dreadfully expen—— Are you sure you can afford it?"

Her companion evidently resenting a suggestion so humiliating, she entered meekly and suggested that they be driven towards Victoria Station.

"It was—it was very good of you—and very brave," she said when they had started. "I should have been lost without you. And then——"

"And then?" he prompted after a pause.

"They—these jewels." She indicated the leather case which, on closer examination, he saw to be of the kind usually carried by young women on their way to City offices. Not at all an ordinary kind of jewel case, he reflected. Probably retailed at about five and eleven-three, when new. "They were stolen," went on the girl.

"I am glad you have got them back," said Stokes, glad to know, if any reliance were to be put on her word, that was to say, that he had not assisted in stealing them himself. "Who do they belong to?"

"To the Countess Valda Tirnovski. They are priceless—pearls and rubies and emeralds. They were stolen from her—by the Red Hand, you know."

"Really. And how——?"

"It was all my fault. That was the terrible part of it. I—I am her foster-sister."

"Indeed," murmured Stokes, feeling that there was nothing more to say. He would have been scarcely less surprised had she claimed to a Countess herself. A thought struck him. Possibly he was unjust. "The Countess is English?"

"Yes—of course. She was a Miss Blundell—

from Lincolnshire. I am her foster-sister. And her secretary. It was my fault the jewels were stolen. The worst of it was—they were not hers, really."

"Not hers?"

"No—they were only lent to her for one night. By—by her lover."

"O-o-h! She has a lover, then?"

"Of course. They always do. Her husband is a very old man."

It struck Stokes as being an inadequate reason, but being less familiar with the private lives of the great than was evidently his companion, he let it pass.

"My fiancé—he—he—I thought he was only what he pretended to be—in the City. And all the while he was—I don't know—a Prince or a Count or something. And one of the leaders of the Red Hand—the Crime Club, you know."

"I beg your pardon—do you mean the gentleman with the buttonhole?"

"Yes. You—you would never have taken him for anything of that sort, would you?"

"I didn't see his face very well," replied Stokes tactfully.

"I was quite deceived about him. He must be in disguise, of course. So one evening when Valda—the Countess I mean—was at a ball, I let him come to see me. He must have taken them then."

"The Countess wasn't wearing them then?"

"No—not that time. She has so many. Hundreds and hundreds of pounds worth. Her husband worships the ground she walks on."

"A lucky woman," commented Stokes, feeling that he was expected to say something.

"Yes—isn't she? So, of course, I knew, as soon as I found they were gone, that I must get them back or her honour would have been lost."

"Yes. I see."

"I didn't dare go to the police either. So I set to work to track him down—not letting him know I suspected him. It was only yesterday I found out where the Red Hand meet."

"In Andover Street, I suppose."

"Yes. And—oh—it would take too long to tell you—but I found out they were having a meeting there tonight to divide the jewels and that, just for an hour, the house would be empty. That was my chance, of course. I had a key—I had stolen it from his pocket while we were making love—and I knew where he had hidden the jewels. Only I was afraid. I knew I couldn't get them by myself. If they had caught me—— I had to find someone who was strong and brave and a gentleman. And then I saw you—in the teashop. And I felt that it was all right."

Stokes blushed at the frankness of the compliment, but his abashed acknowledgments were fortunately cut short by their arrival at Victoria. "Here we are," he said relievedly. "Now—where would you like to go next? I expect you want to relieve the Countess' mind."

"I—I won't trouble you any more. I shall be quite all right now. I will hop on a bus. She—she is staying at—at the Blitz Hotel—where all the rich

people stop, you know, and there is a bus that goes quite close—No. 77." She had leaped from the cab before he could reply. "Oh—and, by the by," she added, stopping in her flight. "My own name is Olga—Olga Krassipoff—and I shall always be grateful to you as long as ever I live." By the time he had paid the taxi she had already disappeared.

For a young man of necessarily careful habits, as was Stokes, the unforeseen cost of the taxi had made the cinema impossible for that evening. Instead he walked back to the Romwell Road pondering the surprising incidents of the day. Although himself innately truthful and as such ready to accept the assurance of others at their face value, he found it almost impossible to believe much of what the girl had told him and more particularly her last surprising statement about her own name, for never had he come across a type more definitely English. On the other hand, they certainly had been attacked by some kind of malefactor—he thrilled pleasantly at the recollection of how well he had come off under such difficult circumstances—there certainly had been something that looked extremely like jewellery in the leather case, and by the time he had crossed Vauxhall Bridge he had come to the conclusion that he had really played a part—not an unworthy part—in a drama of real adventure, even although, as he reluctantly admitted, the clue to its real meaning was denied to him.

All through the dull week which followed, his work in the Fancy Leather Goods Department was lightened by the memory, and when the Thursday came he was

careful to patronise the same teashop in the unformed hope that he might there meet again the mysterious Miss Krassipoff and perhaps learn from her the true inwardness of what had befallen.

She was not there, of course—probably she was revelling in the luxuries of the Blitz Hotel and had forgotten all about him. He had come to one conclusion during the week, in which he found considerable comfort. Her rather shabby clothes had, obviously, been assumed for purposes of disguise, while, as to the unromantic leather case, what better vehicle could be devised for the carriage, unsuspected, of a Golconda. The realisation gave a corresponding reality to the Countess Valda Tirnovski, her lover and her adoring husband, which he found curiously comforting.

A new film of thrilling interest, only just released, was being shown at the Imperial that week. It was entitled, "A Woman's Honour, featuring Joseph Blopp, Theda Gluckstein and their inimitable Trained Tiger Ali-Ben-Bli," and so great was its success that crowds waited outside the entrance for admission. When Stokes reached the theatre on Thursday afternoon he was perturbed to find that he had left his coming over-late and that at least two hundred people were already lined up before him. He had almost decided to defer his visit when, about half-way up the queue, he was aware of a brown blanket coat and a little round hat with a tarnished buckle and onion-coloured stockings that he recognised. He did not hesitate.

"Miss Krassipoff," he said, approaching her. "Miss Krassipoff—fancy meeting you here."

She did not seem to hear him. At least she paid no attention until he stood actually beside her. Then, as her eye caught his, her face went suddenly scarlet. "You—you——" she stammered, and then, with an obvious effort, "Are—are you going in, too?"

He explained that he had so intended, but doubted if he could find a seat. For a long minute she hesitated and then, as though coming to a sudden resolution, "If—if you would like to walk somewhere instead, I have something I want to say to you," she told him in a low voice.

It was not until they had reached the Park, and turned automatically through the gate that she faced him, so that he could see that her eyes were filled with tears. "I—I—have been wanting to see you. Because—because I wanted to beg your pardon for all the wicked lies I told you."

His heart stood still within him. It was perhaps less due to the destruction of the Countess Tirnovski and her jewel-case than to the shattering of the little world of romance he had built up around the figure of Miss Krassipoff. "It—I suppose you mean—it wasn't true about the—Countess?"

"It was all just lies—wicked lies. That is what I wanted to tell you, because you are brave and a true gentleman and—and—I have hated myself ever since."

Moved by a common impulse, they sat down on a bench beneath an overhanging plane-tree. "You

mustn't let it make you unhappy," he told her lamely.

Her tears were falling fast. "I had to tell you—not because you will think any better of me—but—but I couldn't bear that you—I think you were noble and splendid and—and——"

"Tell me," he prompted gently.

"It is—oh—there isn't any Countess Valda and she hasn't got any jewels and I—I work at Franzen's—the theatre costumiers—in Wardour Street. And my mother died three months ago and now—I haven't anybody." She was silent for a long moment. "And—well, you know how it is to be quite alone." She hesitated and then, as though finding solace in her very self-abandonment, continued in a rush of words. "There was a boy—the one you saw—and I thought I liked him and I thought he liked me and he didn't ever tell me and I don't know what you must think of me, but it doesn't matter because we shan't ever see each other again after this, and I thought perhaps I could make him ask me and I made up a story about—about a wicked nobleman who had a hold over me and insisted I should steal jewels from where I was working and give them to him because it was the only way to save my honour. And Miss Isaacs, the manageress, let me have the jewels—they are only paste, of course—to show someone I said might take them sale or return, and I took the revolver out of stock, and I told poor Teddy it was to be for Thursday because that was Early Closing and my landlady and her husband were going to the pictures and

the Earl was coming to fetch me and he must protect me because otherwise I should be carried off by the Red Hand, and—I saw you in a teashop and I thought, and—oh—you know all the rest."

Her sobs made her inarticulate and she buried her face in her hands.

"I don't see anything so dreadful——" Stokes was beginning, but she had regained her self-control.

"But—but the dreadful part of it was that afterwards—when you had been so brave—I met poor Teddy and he did speak as I had meant him to and then I found I couldn't care for him after all as I thought I could—and oh, I don't know what I shall do——"

"I do," said Stokes with a touch of obstinacy in his voice. "You are going to dry your eyes—like that. And then—you are going to understand that I am not a hero any more than you are a Countess, but that we were two lonely people quite alone in the world, and that now we aren't. And then we are going back to the Pictures to see if we can't find two seats together and . . ."

There is something to be said for the Pictures after all.

CHAPTER THE EIGHTEENTH

THE ROMANTICS

I HAVE quoted my own story of the Red Hand as illustrating one of the most human aspects of life in my Borough, and one that is most apt to be overlooked—the addiction to Make-Believe, to invent a second existence which shall gild the dull, routine world in which we of Romwell were condemned to live. This was, naturally, most frequent in the younger woman, at once more imaginative and less habituated to the drudgery of office or workshop, and inevitably it was used to augment the meagre share of amatory romance which was all that Romwell had to offer. A Fairy Prince, imaginary though he confessedly be, supplements very satisfactorily that hard-working, matter-of-fact, altogether unromantic figure which, we know only too well, will be, if he eventuate at all, all that Romwell can offer us in the guise of Dream Hero.

The young man, driven, if less compellingly, by the same yearning for the Romantic and Adventurous, was more given to electing himself to the *rôle* of Fairy Prince. As witness the case of my friend of an evening, the Captain.

I visited our local roller-skating rink one evening. I was no expert at roller-skating—one of the most

popular pastimes of my Borough at the time—but I found pleasure in watching the graceful gestures of the skaters. Among them that evening was a young gentleman whom I knew slightly as a friend of Mr. Andrews. He was skating, extremely well, in partnership with an attractive young lady wearing an appropriately short skirt and regarding rival amateurs with an air of extreme hauteur.

It had not occurred to me to speak to him, and indeed our acquaintance scarcely justified it, and I was accordingly surprised when, having concluded a fox-trot, he handed the young lady to a seat and skated towards me. His expression was shy to the point of embarrassment, as he reminded me that we had met, at an athletic meeting of the Romwell Harriers, a week or so previously, though he could not remember my name. As I was in the same predicament regarding his own, conversation was slow until he put forward the startling request that, if I happened to speak to him in public, I would address him as "Captain." I said that I should be delighted to do so, should the occasion arise, which, in the event, it did not till half an hour later. As I left the rink it was to find him with the young lady close beside me, and he received my "Good-night, Captain," with a smile in which gratitude and complacency were curiously mingled.

I obtained the explanation of this incident, which I had indeed forgotten, some days later, when, while interviewing Mr. Andrews on a matter of margarine, he explained it to me. The Captain, whose name I have again forgotten, had recently returned from his

annual holiday at Clacton-on-Sea. There he had become acquainted with a young lady of noble parentage, the Honourable Miss Vavasour, as I will call her. Liking ripened into love with extreme rapidity, as is the local custom, and with the very creditable desire not to make her feel embarrassed at having conceived a passion for one below her in rank, he assumed his captaincy for the occasion. Thanks to his temporary ownership of one of his employer's motor cycles—for he was professionally employed in a Romwell garage—he was enabled to support his pretensions with credit, and the affair, contrary to convention, lasted even after the return of the principals to Town. Hence his very natural fear that, in addressing him in the young lady's presence, I might bring about a misunderstanding.

I suggested that the swain, however enamoured, was wilfully deceiving the young lady. Mr. Andrews smiled and replied that her rank was as purely imaginary as his, and that, what was more, both of them were perfectly aware of it.

In deliberately lying—as some might consider it—to the young lady and accepting her reciprocal lies, neither the Captain nor the Honourable Miss had any real wish to deceive. Each accepted the offered falsehood on the clear understanding that his own was similarly accepted. There were, admittedly, two worlds: the one grey, sober, matter-of-fact; the other roseate, romantic. To yourself, your relations, and, after a certain period of married life, to your wife or husband, you might be one dreadfully real person;

to your dream self, your casual acquaintances and, most particularly, your fellow-adventurer into the world of Make-Believe, you were quite another. How could the strictest moralist reprehend attempts so naive to lace the dull drabness of life with some make-believe embroidery? What real happening could you hope for that could offer such infinite solace as the pretence that you were an unhappy Princess, forced from our father's palace by the levinbolt of revolution or the dark machinations of rivals, as you might decide, and reduced to the disguise of general servant until the clouds should lift? What could better lighten the monotony of handing out stamps across a counter than the realisation that your tale of misfortune was accepted by the splendid young hero you met last Sunday on a bench in Romwell Park, and were trysted with for half-past six precisely, whom you knew from his own confession to be the son and heir of a belted Earl, gathering material for his philanthropic life-work? Lest you think that I exaggerate, let me quote the case of the Honourable Molly McAfee.

Molly McAfee was employed at Blundell's isinglass works in Suffren Street. She had there fifty or sixty colleagues, many of whom were disinherited Princesses, Duchesses and Honourables in their own right. I got to know her first through Edna Waters—whose title I forget—who was a friend of Lettuce Mellon, and at first I was foolishly inclined to sympathise with her because she was so very small and *chétive*, and her clothes, despite their neatness, suggestive of such real poverty. But after our second meeting I learned, not

indeed from her own lips, but from those of a more eligible young gentleman in whose company I happened to be, that she was a Social Worker. Her real home was in Mayfair ; her father was an M.P. and an ex-Minister. (Obviously his real name could not be disclosed, lest his career should be imperilled.) She had always been interested in the lives of the Poor—this she told me herself some time later, when we knew each other better, and you should have heard the kindly condescension with which she dwelt upon the word. After long and careful thought, she made up her mind to cast off the bonds of the Court Circular and the foolish luxury and display of Society, in order to devote herself to benefiting her poorer sisters.

Actually her deceased father had been an assistant in a drapery store, and her mother, suffering from an incurable illness, was entirely dependent upon her. But she differed from most of my Borough's Rainbow Hunters in that she had so long rehearsed and, indeed, lived the incidents of her dream-life, that she had at last come to believe in them. Little by little the Cabinet Minister and the Mayfair mansion faded into the background ; she came to have such an influence, for good, over her fellow-workers, that in the end, as I heard from another source, the firm for which she worked, having perhaps more imagination than most, gave her a position in the welfare-work side of their organisation, and when I last heard of her she had a comparatively important post connected with County Council care committees, as striking an example as I

know of how a dream can become a reality if only one dreams hard enough.

Molly McAfee, being, from her name, a Celt, was an extreme case. In most the dream-life was no more than a shade, a transparent veil, to be assumed on occasions when added dignity or charm seemed desirable, such as the first meeting with a possible husband, or with a new lodger in the same house. Mrs. Mellon, for instance, felt it no more than her duty—as exalting the whole establishment—to explain to each applicant for rooms that her late father was Rector of some village near Canterbury, and her grandfather an Archbishop. Another lady of my acquaintance based her claim to social precedence upon a similarity of name with a lady of title who was the heroine of a peculiarly scabrous divorce case.

For it was a peculiarity of rank and fashion in my Borough that the appeal was in its romance, irrespective of incidental circumstances. I heard of one young man who, purely to give himself consequence, hinted mysteriously to his friends that he was the real author of a particularly revolting murder for whom the police were hunting high and low. Some unkind acquaintance, no more believing the story than did its originator, treacherously repeated it to the police, and thereby earned, not his dislike, but his gratitude, for giving him the opportunity of a moment's notoriety while the authorities made the necessary investigations as to his guilt.

Thus it was that while King George lived surrounded by his courtiers in St. James's, we of my

Borough, drab and indistinguishable though we might appear seen from above, had yet our own Rank and Fashion, the more desirable that it was not at all exclusive, so that anyone might and almost everybody did belong to it—usually in youth, when it was all the more enjoyable.

I shall always regret that my acquaintance with Romwell began at too late a period of its history for me even to attempt to judge how far this very great alleviation of the dull lives led by so very many of my neighbours had its origins in the new worlds opened by the cinema and the sixpenny " thriller," or whether the happy world of Make-Believe had gilded all its history. No doubt when Henry V. was Prince of Wales, the daughters of his poorer subjects wove day-dreams about him, just as did those of later ages about his contemporary descendants. But lacking data about which to build their dream pictures, they must have been very much less actual—just as the young woman who worked in Benyon's teashop would have found more difficulty in electing herself a " Vamp " or " Social Leader," had she not credible models of such persons offered for her imitation on the screen or in the novel that cheered her tram-ride. True that she regarded them, along with the news of the day served up for her in the popular Press, as pure romance and having no bearing on real life, which, had it been generally realised, might have solaced those who feared lest she be affected for ill by what she saw and read. The villainies or the immoralities of the screen or the thriller were to her as remote from realities, as

little conceivable as real models upon which to found her behaviour in real life, as were the posturings of Ariel to a Tibetan lama. In her dream life, she might have a hundred lovers, commit a dozen murders, drive a thousand young men to destruction by her fatal beauty ; she would none the less continue on her daily round of duty without being influenced one hairs-breath from the straight and narrow path along which her workaday conscience led her. So with the young man ; his adoption of military rank might indeed lead him to some little extravagance and splendour in the matter of neckties, whereby to support pretensions based upon a gossip-writer's paragraph—but he might find worse guidance from some of the real men by whom he was surrounded, after all.

It would be a dull world were Romance and Make-Believe prohibited. Romwell, in particular, would be quite unbearable.

CHAPTER THE NINETEENTH

RAISING THE STANDARD

I HAD been abroad for a time, and, returning to Mrs. Mellon's, where I was then living, I let myself in and hurried upstairs to my room without meeting anyone at all, as I suppose sometimes happens to rabbits in even the most crowded warrens. But when I opened my door I was met by a chorus of excited squeaks and found myself facing a group of ladies which included Mrs. Mellon, three friends, Lettuce in a state of moderate undress, and a stouter lady, kneeling before her and doing something to her waist with a piece of brown paper and a packet of pins.

I was, as you may suppose, the most embarrassed, Lettuce the least, probably because she realised that her slim little figure with its bare arms and shoulders was nothing of which to be ashamed. Her mother confounded herself in apologies as she explained that, not expecting me back so soon, she had taken the liberty to borrow my room as trying-on *atelier* for Lettuce's trousseau, then being prepared for her approaching marriage to Charley Wilson. Our mutual apologies pleasantly accepted and no good reason found why I should not remain, I busied myself modestly among my papers and the séance continued,

amid much reference to tucks, frills and similar words of ritual.

I should have thought no more of the incident save for a chance remark by Mrs. Mellon, proudly reminiscing, that when she was married she had but one new dress and glad to get it. Lettuce was to have, as I gathered, not only four costumes, for being married, for "going away," for "evenings" and for "the afternoon," but what in my ignorance I should have thought a superfluity of underclothing—all frankly discussed before my blushing ears—stockings and "articles of vanity" in general. Yet, as I very well knew, not only was Mrs. Mellon the reverse of wealthy, for the letting of Romwell lodgings is no short-cut to affluence, but she had been, could any reliance be placed upon her stories of the past, which was, of course, doubtful, comparatively better off at the time of her own marriage thirty years before.

It puzzled me much, as it must have puzzled any stranger, when I first came to Romwell after my long absence, to reconcile the contradictory evidence of my eyes and ears. Could I believe what I heard—and had been hearing in my foreign home for years previously—England, and especially English trade and industry, was at the last gasp; unemployment was universal; no one, rich or poor, had any money to spend; bankruptcy was the immediate lot for all alike, with starvation in close attendance. Yet I found, if I might believe my eyes, all the signs of comfort, even of luxury. The shops, very much more splendid than anything I could remember, displayed an unpre-

cedented wealth of goods; they were crowded, especially the drapers and luxury traders, with eager women, having apparently plenty of money to spend; on all sides had sprung up palaces of one kind or another devoted to pleasures that certainly were not gratuitous; it were not too much to say that the Romwell High Road or Avon Parade spoke more certainly of wealth than had Regent Street or Bond Street a generation previously. At every point my eyes insisted that what my ears had told me, with so much circumstance, was clamantly untrue.

Mr. Andrews of the egg-shop it was to whom I ultimately owed the explanation of the seeming paradox. I met him coming down Exeter Street, which was the shortest way to Romwell Park, arm-in-arm with Miss Parsons, to whom he was then engaged, though it was later broken off, I was sorry to hear, on a matter of social technique. They told me that they had been playing a round of golf with other members of the club. It had been a foursome and they had won by six up and five to play, and they were naturally very jubilant and talked a good deal of Colonel Bogey. As I had not understood that there were golfing facilities anywhere in the neighbourhood, I was puzzled at first, but finally realised that the golf-course they patronised was in Romwell Park, where was a public putting green. It had eighteen holes, very ingeniously contrived so that it took up little more space than a tennis court, and you paid sixpence for entrance fee and subscription, and for that sixpence you were also entitled to a putter and a ball.

And while Mr. Andrews was telling me how he had been bunkered at the fourth hole and stymied at the sixth I began to understand what was really meant by the Higher Standard of Living, of which I had heard much, even in my Continental exile.

Leaving out of the question the teashops, to which I have already referred, the Higher Standard was less due to the European War, as was generally believed, than to the higher standard of publicity which followed it. As I have pointed out, there really was a better and a higher standard than the observer was likely to realise, because the same standards of, for instance, clothes, or meals, without themselves changing to any appreciable extent, were now demanded by and supplied to people who had in an earlier generation belonged to a social class that never dreamed of them. Compulsory education had made reading, or the power to read, universal. The excellent national snobbishness which had so much to do with the bloodlessness of the English Revolution made it essential that more than their due share of newspaper space should be given to the amusements of the wealthier class. Mr. Andrews and Miss Parsons, reading in their favourite paper about golf, for instance, very naturally could see no reason why they should not play golf as much as did their social superiors. Unfortunately golf, in those days, was an expensive form of recreation. It was impossible for anyone drawing the wages and working the hours drawn and worked by the assistant in an egg shop to find money or leisure to belong to a real golf club; the Higher Standard

provided him with an entirely satisfactory substitute. For sixpence a round he and Miss Parsons and their friends could become golfers and obtain the same satisfaction from it as could real golfers playing real holes with their own clubs. It was admittedly an inferior substitute, but it sounded extremely like the real thing when you told your friends about it, and that was, after all, the thing that really mattered.

It was easy enough to find fault with that Higher Standard of which publicists wrote so complacently. It was frankly a sham, though based upon an undoubted fact—that the things we believe are the only realities. Mr. Andrews was not a golfer because he putted balls about in Romwell Park; Lettuce Mellon's trousseau was really no better than had been her mother's. Her four dresses cost no more than had Mrs. Mellon's one; their material was almost certainly inferior; she got no more real satisfaction out of them than had her mother and probably less real service; to wear rather shoddy imitations of the clothes worn by people of more wealth; to flock to rather shoddy imitations of the resorts frequented by people of more understanding: these things did not make you a better man than your father. But, granting all this, they did at least give you infinite satisfaction for the time.

Mr. Andrews, as I have said, got as much pleasure out of his County Council putter as did any real golfer out of the most expensive clubs he could buy for money: Lettuce was very much more complacent over her four shoddy dresses than was the

millionaire's daughter, married at St. Margaret's on the same day, over her real trousseau, however expensive or extensive. You felt the satisfaction of being a patron of the Drama in your one-and-three-penny tip-up velvet fauteuil at the Imperial Talkie-drome as fully as did the bluest-blooded Reichsgraf who ever owned his box at the Hofoper. And, what was infinitely more delightful, you felt yourself his equal.

Although, then, the Higher Standard of Living was essentially sham, and as such to be deprecated by the moralist, it might be said for it that it gave an infinite amount of happiness to a very large number of people. Happiness is in the mind of the rejoicer; tinsel is really better than gold, if only it glitter more and cost less.

Again, Mrs. Mellon might very reasonably have been jealous of the wealthy woman who had a dozen dresses when she had only one; the tenant of a hard bench in the gallery might envy the occupant of a private box; the man who can only look over the fence grow wroth at the plutocratic golfers playing on ground forbidden to him. They were different to himself, strange, to be disliked and perhaps hated, certainly envied. But Mr. Andrews was—or held himself—as much a golfer as the Duke of Plaza Toro; Lettuce's trousseau differed only in degree from that of his daughter; when you read in the diary of a Sunday newspaper reporter that he lunched yesterday off *Finicopter à la Midas* with the Emperor of Ylangylang you had but to visit your local "Round House" to find the same *plat*, or something very like

it, on the menu at eightpence per portion. Accordingly you felt no revolutionary ferocity ; you had no desire to hurl the Emperor from his throne ; you were men and *bon vivants* together. Such a paragraph might induce you to spend more than you could afford on your own lunch ; it left you unresentful of what your brother could afford to spend.

While it were easy to condemn the Higher Standard —as to cavil at the uselessness of a rainbow—it were even easier to defend it, as many did, because it was good for trade. It was immediately born, that is to say, of the widening understanding of the art of advertisement, partly imported from the United States, partly reminiscent of war-time propaganda. The " nation-wide " advertiser was the first to realise its advantages and wisely effected an entire volte-face in his methods as radical as it was well-considered. Instead of addressing himself—as had his less understanding predecessors—to the intelligent few, he chose out instead the least instructed of his possible clients and directed all his blandishments at him—or her.

Consider, for instance, the methods of a post-war manufacturer of, let us say, ready-made dress suits, as compared with those of his grandfather. That simple-minded old gentleman would have said to himself that only a small proportion of the male population dressed for dinner, and would have set himself to convince that minority that the dress suits he had to offer were superior, in cost or quality, to those they were accustomed to wear. Were he alive to-day, you

must seek him in the Bankruptcy Court. His wiser grandson selects that national newspaper appealing to the largest, which is to say the least intelligent, public, and inserts in it some such delicate innuendo as the following: "You are a Real Gent or you would not live in Romwell. Of course you always dress for dinner. Probably you have up to now paid thirty or forty guineas to some old-fashioned tailor. For thirty shillings down and a few small instalments out of income I offer you——" And so on and so forth.

Charley Wilson, looking for the latest greyhound racing results, sees this advertisement, cunningly placed beside them. Possibly it leaves him cold. Lettuce, seeking information as to the proper draping of imitation pearl necklaces, also sees it. Her imagination is fired. Certainly her Charley is a real gent. Evidently it is incumbent upon him to possess a dress suit. The new idea continues to grow, long after the advertisement has ceased to appear. In the end a thousand Charleys are induced by as many Lettuces to purchase ready-made dress-suits, and the manufacturer buys a house in Grosvenor Square and begins to dress for dinner—though not in a suit of his own manufacture!

I know that this is true in the main, for the real Charley Wilson, obedient to the real Lettuce, really did buy a dress-suit on the hire-purchase system, and wore it once at a dance at the skating-rink, where, however, he was so mercilessly chaffed by less fortunate rivals that it was never seen again in public. At least he had assisted in heightening the Standard of

Living and encouraging British industry at his own expense. When I first went to live in Romwell, I was foolishly amused by an announcement displayed in the window of a very small greengrocer's shop in a side-street. " It is fashionable to shop at Soanso's," it declared proudly. That greengrocer was a wiser man than I.

In a community in which so large a portion of the shopping-public was of very small means—if not actually dependent upon Unemployment Benefit—the Higher Standard could never have been reached but for the coincidental spread of the Hire Purchase System. As it was with Charley Wilson's dress suit, so it was with motor cycles, jewellery, gramophones, baby carriages and fifty other things, and the one serious objection—if we grant that thrift be an over-rated virtue—would seem to have been that long after the dress-suit was worn out, the motor cycle smashed against a lamp-post, or the radio-set hopelessly out of order, the monthly payments had to be kept up under penalty of a county-court publicity likely to prejudice an employer very unfavourably.

Needless to say, the Higher Standard reached its most frequent expression in the trades devoted to feminine adornment, nor, remembering the growing difficulties in finding husbands and the pathetic reliance placed even by the plainest woman upon dress, cosmetics and general " aids to beauty " to increase her desirability, could it be altogether attributed to mere vanity. Here, again, the clever advertiser found an almost illimitable field for his abilities. If you were a

simple soul, filled with a great yearning after the unattainable; if you read, cunningly inserted in the pages of your favourite serial story, "You are a Woman! Therefore you are a Lovely Siren, born to Rule Men's Hearts by your Matchless Feminine Charm and Radiant Beauty," you were naturally struck at finding yourself described as being so exactly as you would like to think you were. You read on, to find that the way to have your attractions universally acknowledged was to buy a pair of Snatchpenny's Supreme Art-Silk Stockings at two and eleven-three. Then you calculated that by going without your lunch for a week or so you would be able to afford them, and thus to bring Bert Untel an unresisting captive at your glistening feet, and—after all, why not?

I was often told by Mrs. Thwaites, Mrs. Mellon and other matrons who, themselves not insensible to the charms of dress, yet condemned the extravagance of their juniors, that the young women of Romwell spent too much on their backs and too little on their stomachs. There was so much the more excuse for them that, not only in advertisements, but through every medium thought capable of influencing her, the woman of Romwell had it impressed upon her as a duty that she must give way to her natural craving for self-adornment. During my stay in my Borough, a County Court Judge, greatly daring, ventured to suggest during a case that silk stockings at fifteen shillings a pair were not really necessities to a girl employed behind the counter. At once a storm arose; eager interviewers hurried off to ask the views of

important drapers, milliners, manufacturers of silk stockings and other unprejudiced authorities. They were unanimous in declaring that not only was a working girl justified in buying expensive stockings, but that it was her plain duty to buy and to keep on buying them, and that anyone who dared to criticise her, judge though he be, must be considered an enemy to his country. Eager commentators hurried to endorse their dicta, declaring categorically and statistically that the whole future of British industry, of the Empire and of civilised man, would be jeopardised were the heretical judge believed.

I have no doubt they were right; I am quite certain that heretical judges were in a very small minority, and I do not at all expect on my next visit to Romwell to find that the quaint little creatures who strive so hard to brighten its grey streets with their pretty clothes have given up the effort, or even that such a stern moralist as Mrs. Thwaites has adopted sackcloth and ashes as her daily wear. I should be very sorry to find it so. For human beauty unadorned is the most depressing spectacle I have met with in all my wanderings—even more so than a Receiver in Bankruptcy.

CHAPTER THE TWENTIETH

"THIS IS HEAVEN"

Six men were digging a large hole in the roadway of Avon Parade as I passed, at a spot where the wood pavement had been relaid not six weeks before. An observant French friend, struck by the frequency with which our roads were torn up, when the provision of a subway-tunnel beneath them once and for all would have seemed more economical, once asked me whether the authorities preferred the less obvious method as providing constant work for the unemployed. Whether or no, the six road breakers had returned, after their short respite, to the scene of their earlier labours, and while four of them supervised the operation, two operated with electric drills, infernal machines then recently introduced, which made more and more nerve-racking din than any other instrument of torture of the time.

Perhaps twenty people, men and women, were watching the six, watching them silently, patiently and persistently, as though rooted to the spot. It is a merciful provision of Nature that the human nerves become in time accustomed to the most harrowing noises, and even to lament their cessation, as was, for instance, shown by natives of Romwell doomed to stay for a time in the country, martyrs to its appalling

peace. Those Partingtonian protestants who filled the correspondence colums of the more serious newspapers with their complaints of the ever-increasing noise of city life were thus in a small and selfish minority, the more so that, as every traveller knew, London at its noisiest was a mere Sleepy Hollow compared to Paris or Rome or New York.

The greater the din made by the electric drills, the more satisfied appeared the onlookers. They did not appear to resent, scarcely even to hear the noise; solemnly they gazed as though expecting, as perhaps they were, that at any moment the drills, bursting through the road-skin, might penetrate into some Aladdin's palace filled with diamonds. The same crowd, to all appearance, was still gazing, with similar peaceful anticipation, when I passed the spot again an hour or two later.

At a time when labour was so markedly out of fashion; when it was seriously declared an outrage that men should be, not forced, but permitted to work for more than seven hours a day, lest others be tempted to do the same; when the lot of the drone—voluntary or involuntary—compared so favourably with that of the working-bee, the provision of ways to pass the time became of the first importance. It needed but a glance at any of those newspapers which were devoted to reflecting rather than to guiding the public mind to see how large a proportion of their space was devoted to sports and amusements of one kind or another, and how comparatively little to more serious subjects. And it had become a financial

commonplace that whereas in the old dead pre-war days the safest form of investment was considered to be foodstuffs or other daily necessaries, in those later days amusement-catering had become the more certain road to affluence, circuses having become very much more necessary than bread. Nowhere was this more truly the case than in my Borough.

A commonplace of temperance oratory in our father's time was the lamentation that public-houses were the handsomest and most prominent features of the London streets. They were still prominent, as witness the " Grey Mare," and, with the branch offices of the great banks, were noticeable as almost monopolising the talent devoted to domestic architecture. So far as splendour went, they cut but a poor figure in Romwell and elsewhere beside the garish glories of the cinema theatres, and were frequently outclassed by the dance-halls, skating rinks, teashops and similar altars dedicated to the amusements of the poorer class.

I do not know how many cinema theatres Romwell could boast in my time—and they have doubtless increased since then. At least half a dozen claimed to be the largest and most luxurious in the world, and, large as was their accommodation, they were never at a loss for patronage at any hour of the day.

From the beginning the cinema, as later the " talkie," was destined to conquer in a democratic age, if only that it started without the handicap of intellectual pretensions. The legitimate theatre, although, like its more fortunate younger sisters,

fundamentally designed for the amusement of the " tired business man," had been slowly losing grip of the larger public, owing to the unfortunate claims made on its behalf to be considered an intellectual medium, ever since the Little Theatre rose on the ruins of Richardson's booth. But the cinema, instead of yearning after the unattainable, wisely settled down from the beginning to be frankly catchpenny. Its directors, themselves men of few intellectual pretensions, declared at the time that the average intelligence of their patrons, which they set themselves to satisfy, was that of a child of fourteen—and a backward child at that, judging from the fare placed before the audiences of Romwell.

Naturally the intellectuals were up in arms ; their lamentations over the low artistic or mental level of cinema productions being ubiquitous and unceasing. Equally naturally, such complaints showed an entire lack of imagination, as though they had lamented the unæsthetic colouring of, say, human blood. The film purveyor—then as now and always—existed to satisfy his patrons. Had he put forward such films as would have satisfied his self-appointed censors he might have closed his doors in a week—and saved money. For it was the truth that, despite their more rational behaviour and their more prosperous exteriors, cinema audiences at the time of which I write were composed of just the same kind of people, who, fifty years previously, sought their pastime in the tap-room for want of an agreeable alternative. Just as the landlord of the " Goat and Compasses " would have been inviting

disaster had he endeavoured to force absinthe down the reluctant throats of those who drank his beer, so would his successor of post-war days have faced ruin had he offered his patrons fare unsuited to their mental palates, simply because they showed an appreciation of his velvet fauteuils and the marble palace that had cost a million.

Throughout history the really popular pastime with the greater public has always been that which makes the smallest demand upon mind or body. To stand outside a tent guffawing at the efforts of the man grinning through a horse collar, to loll on a wooden bench shouting encouragement or abuse at footballers, or Christian martyrs, or greyhounds ; to weep comfortably over the misfortunes of people as nearly like yourself as possible, but dressed in such glittering trappings as you would like to wear yourself ; to see nothing and hear nothing that need put you to the trouble of moving a muscle of your body or a grey cell of your brain ; to loll under a palm tree with attendant houris pouring alcoholised ambrosia into your mouth, such has always been the heaven of the masses. In the cinema they acquired it—to a degree thitherto unknown. Shortly before I left Romwell I happened to pass one of the largest and most luxurious of all the Largest and most Luxurious Super-super-Palaces in the World. It was a rainy evening, but long queues were waiting for admission. Above them, an electric sign fifty feet long blazed forth the intriguing words, "This Is Heaven!" I do not know whether it referred to the palace itself or was the title of some

cinedrama then being performed; it was perfectly justified in either case.

So it was with all the other forms of pastime which, under the new and Higher Standard of Living, brought such fortune to their discoverers. The half-paid-for gramophones which filled every corner of Mrs. Mellon's house with cacophonic melodies would have been drugs on the market had they been adapted only to play serious music. The people who bought them and sat listening to them for hours at a time did not in the least want serious music. Their desire was for something that might fill their ears pleasantly without demanding any mental effort. Were it sufficiently barbaric pleasantly to tickle those fundamental impulses which we share with the negro and the more sentimental of the apes, so much the better. The " wireless " would never have found one-tenth of its subscribers but for that merciful provision which allowed it to be switched off at any moment when it threatened to become too thought-provocative.

When the folk of Romwell went in their thousands to a professional football match, it was not, or only secondarily, to admire the players' skill; not even—for they were the kindliest of people—in the hope of seeing some of the players injured, as it was in some countries known to me, but simply for the satisfaction of watching someone else work extremely hard while they themselves were doing—and especially thinking—nothing. The men really responsible for all the heart-burning aroused by the lack of intel-

lectuality inevitable to really popular pastimes was that unhappy zealot who first endeavoured to harness amusement to instruction. He forgot—as we are all apt to forget—that the Devil was and remains unpopular, not because he is an Enemy of Mankind, but because he tempted us with the Apple of the Tree of Knowledge, condemned us to the painful possibility of thought, and deprived us for ever of the chance of remaining as carelessly happy as any other plump cattle in a Garden.

It might have been—and was—frequently adduced by the optimistic that the general lust for "reading" was a sign that the Higher Standard of Living extended to the minds as well as the bodies of the people of my Borough. Never, certainly, had there been such reference to the printed page. You could not travel in a train or tramcar without being impressed by the number of your fellow-passengers with their noses buried in the pages of book or magazine or newspaper; never had the business of the spectacle maker attained such prosperity. Especially was the output of fiction become a phenomenon thitherto undreamed of. Anything which is printed is Literature, declared the optimist; the number of novels of all kinds notoriously increases year after year; therefore popular appreciation of Literature must be increasing and the popular intelligence on the upgrade. That the latter conclusion might be true there were reasons for hoping; to base it upon the spectacle of a little work-girl straining her eyes in the uncertain light of a tramcar was deceptive. The optimist did not realise,

as did, fortunately for themselves, authors, publishers and distributors alike, that book-making and Literature are not identical or even allied branches of the same industry. A popular novel may no doubt be Literature, as we have many examples to prove, just as a moneylender may be a saint ; but its primary purpose is not literary, any more than is his to attain the Kingdom of Heaven. The vast majority of the works of popular fiction published at the time of which I am writing, of which a fair proportion penetrated to Romwell, were not and did not claim to be Literature, any more than did greyhound racing claim to be an Art. They were quite frankly intended to aid their public in passing the time as agreeably as possible—and did so to admiration. Written " by the people and for the people," they filled a wide gap in the lives of the very many who had learned to read in the Council Schools, but had not cared to adventure further along the stony roads of knowledge. Only less than the cinema star—and that only because the ear is less receptive than the eye—did the contemporary fiction-writer deserve public gratitude for providing, however crudely, that golden touch of Romance which could alone make endurable the grey lives of very many.

Reading, then, took a high place among the pastimes of my Borough—especially of the young women. Many of them indeed—there were two among even my limited acquaintance—hearing of the vast fortunes accumulated by popular fiction writers, wrote novels themselves, and I do not know that they were less

literary than much that was published at the time, though I never heard whether they found publishers. The wireless was scarcely less popular as a means of escape from realities. As you looked along the narrow vistas of the little back gardens nothing was more significant than the rows of poles carrying the boon of forgetfulness to those striving to forget themselves and their neighbours. But reading, "listening in," the cinema itself, were but of small account compared to what had become the most universal—as it was the least admirable—pastime gambling.

Of the three human weaknesses which moralists tell us have the most deplorable results, drink, feminine vanity-spending, and gambling, the widening sway of the last-named was among the most evident results of the Higher Standard in Romwell. Drink was fighting a losing battle; dress extravagance, as I have pointed out, was regarded as on the whole desirable and was never publicly condemned; gambling not only flourished in its more familiar forms, but had found a dozen new fields for its activities, very much more attractive to the lazy-minded. I suppose it takes a certain amount of mental effort to select the horse on which you propose to put your money; none at all was needed for the various ingenious infringements of the Lottery Acts which flourished in the decade after the war—simply because, if they were to appeal widely enough, they must be understood by the least intelligent. Innumerable sharp brains were set to work to find out profitable ways of evading the law; the winners of football

matches and the composers of cross-word puzzles were alike pressed into the service, the very necessary interference of the police was hotly denounced as an interference with the liberty of the subject, machine-made bookmakers were introduced under the benevolent patronage of needy Chancellors, and gambling, in one form or another, at the time I left the Borough, had become unquestionably the most popular form of amusement.

Had a stranger any doubt that amusement was the one real preoccupation of my Borough at that particular moment of its history he should have placed himself at the corner of Brandon Street about two o'clock on an autumn or winter afternoon and observed the passers-by. Brandon Street led to the football field of the " Calves," the love-name of one of the clubs belonging to the Football Association League, and upon any fine Saturday anywhere up to twenty thousand people thronged its grounds to watch its efforts towards leadership. I have stood outside a good many large factories in a good many countries in my time ; I never knew one where the attendance was so regular or so punctual or so enthusiastic as that which gathered to watch twenty-two other men working their hardest—for meagre enough pay, as I have been told by their admirers.

So it was with greyhound racing, to serve which, as there was no course in my Borough, dozens of motor-charabancs started every evening to carry with them local enthusiasts, women seeming for some reason in the majority. I attended one such race myself and I

can imagine no more wearisome form of entertainment than sitting for several hours on a hard bench to watch half a dozen dogs dash by for a matter of a few seconds. That is, of course, a matter of taste, and no doubt many of the Romwell " fans " found real amusement in it, though I imagine that had there been no bookmakers in attendance the crowds would have been very much smaller and less enthusiastic.

A frequent criticism levelled at these democratic *wappengangs* was that their followers, and especially the young men among them, were taught to prefer watching other men play rather than to play themselves. So far as Romwell was concerned, this was not, I think, the case. Leaving out the women and the older men, many—I think the larger number—of the young men were players themselves and attended the League matches rather to learn to improve their own play than for any other reason, though no doubt they also " put a bit on " their favourites at the same time. To the foreigner, or to one who has lived much abroad, the real danger seemed to be less in the time and money wasted in such forms of amusement than in the universal craving after amusements of any kind, and the way in which they loomed, in the popular imagination, so very much more largely than did industry. Leaving the United States out of the question, where a man had every reason for working hard in view of the immense rewards his work could bring him when intelligently directed, and comparing only such countries as France, Germany or Italy, where labour conditions were worse than in Romwell,

alike in hours, pay or provision for old age, the whole attitude of the working class was curiously different. In France, in Germany and in Italy, it is true, labour had not become so standardised. There was still an infinity of small craftsmen working for themselves or in small private workshops. Nor had automatic machinery been brought into anything like such universal use ; the man who worked with his hands might still have the pleasure of seeing what he was creating growing up into an entity between them. Whatever the reason, the frank assumption by the younger generation in Romwell that their daily work was at best a disagreeable necessity, at worst an abominable imposition, always a thing to be got over as soon as possible and to be avoided whenever possible, so that the real business of life, amusement, might be enjoyed, was in my experience, unique.

Life must be a wearisome business where so much human energy need be devoted to devising ways of passing the time!

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-FIRST

AN AMATEUR GLADIATOR

ALTHOUGH as a salute of ceremony or affection, appropriate to either sex, it may be arguable that the rubbing of noses is at once more sensible and more sanitary than the pressing of lips, I am bound to say, as one who has practised both, that the kiss is the more agreeable of the two, even making allowances for racial or colour prejudice. Therefore, when, in the presence of two or three hundred people Lettuce Mellon cast her arms enthusiastically round me and kissed me with a pretty enthusiasm, I was, though embarrassed, not at all displeased. It is true that I was but the kissing-block or vicar for my young friend Charley Wilson, who a moment previously, had covered himself with glory by winning the fourth or deciding heat of the 100 yards sprint in the excellent time of $10\frac{3}{4}$ seconds.

Charley Wilson, in the intervals of conducting, with entire satisfaction to his employers, a No. 37 bus on the route between Peckham and Isleworth, was an athlete of no small promise and a leading member of the Romwell Harriers, in which capacity, whenever his official duties permitted, you might have seen him trotting scientifically along the High Road, clad in running shorts. But although he had achieved several

earlier successes, it was the 100 yards sprint which really secured him at once fame and, in the event, the hand of Lettuce Mellon.

Although Charley Wilson was not only a standard bearer for our local athletes, and deservedly so, as having been born in the Borough and lived there all his life, I could never think of him as at all representative of its younger men. Physically, he was a throw-back to his East Anglian ancestors, his grandfather having abandoned the losing trade of fisherman, and brought his children and his destinies to London. Charley's hair was like spun gold, and his complexion pure rose leaf—a fact of which he was, I think, proud when in feminine society and ashamed when among his peers—unmarred, and in this he was very definitely not of the Borough, by a single spot or blemish.

In character Charley Wilson always appeared to me one of the most admirable young men I have known. He was far from intellectual; I should hesitate to call him even intelligent; I doubt if he ever had an unprompted thought in his life. He was upright in mind as in body; he was scrupulously truthful in a world that was very much the reverse; above all, he carried his love of fair-play almost to extremes. We had an example of it while I was digesting Lettuce's unexpected embrace, for instead of coming to receive his lady-love's congratulations, he was eagerly arguing with the judge that the race ought to be run over again. Bill or Jimmy or Thomas—one of his rivals for the myrtle crown—had not had a fair start; he had slipped on a banana skin that had somehow lain

unnoticed on the track, lost a number of strides, and thus been deprived of the honour which, according to Charley Wilson, he would otherwise have gained.

In this I honestly think Charley typified both my Borough and his country, and provided one of those shades of national character which foreigners find it so hard to credit or to understand. When I have argued with foreign friends, of more nations than one, that the average decent young Englishman is really and sincerely almost as pleased when his rival wins as though he had won himself, I have been met by flat disbelief or a gentle shoulder-shrugging. Yet not only is it the case, but it is a portent worthy of study by foreign observers, if only that it may provide an explanation for certain incidents of British foreign policy otherwise likely to be attributed to inconstancy, if not to flat perfidy. For it is that unique sympathy with the loser, born of pity for the underdog, and not any deliberate change of policy or calculation of forces which has always ranged a victorious England on the side of her beaten adversary, and when Frenchmen marvelled, as they often did in my presence, at her apparent veering round from France to Germany as a result of the common victory in the Great War, I have replied—usually in vain—that it was not in the least because she mistrusted the increased power of victorious France, but because she instinctively sympathised with unfortunate Germany.

In a foreign town in which I lived for a time, but which I need not specify more closely, was a famous University which prided itself not a little on its

athletic supremacy. An occasion arose when, at an annual inter-university meeting, that supremacy was challenged by a rival, less famous, institution from another part of the country. Especially to be dreaded was a long-distance runner whom friends and foes alike expected to win, let us call it a ten-mile race, with consummate ease. How did the supporters of the threatened university deal with the emergency? About half a mile from the winning post, where the course ran through a lonely tract of country, some of them erected a tent and all the simulacra of a winning post. When the alien leader arrived, as was expected, far ahead of all his competitors, the treacherous interlopers rushed out to greet him with acclamations, congratulated him on his victory, and, leading him within the tent, lavished attentions and refreshments on him. Meanwhile their own champion passed and reached the real winning post well ahead of all his rivals!

I suppose it is possible, though difficult, to imagine such a thing happening in England; I am quite sure that the sequel could not. For the perpetrators of the fraud, instead of being thenceforward outcasts from their fellows, were greeted as saviours of the mother-university's honour, and even the authorities, if they did not officially applaud, took no steps towards punishing the originators of the meanest piece of rascality I ever encountered. What would have happened to them at an English University, I wonder? And how would Charley Wilson and his like have greeted them?

I suppose that this spirit of very real chivalry inherent in the English, more than any other people

I know, except perhaps the Nipponese, is primarily due to the fact that they have never been ultimately conquered, and that, accordingly, never having endured the yoke of a conqueror, they cannot understand the bitterness of the vanquished. At least, that tolerant chivalry which is akin to understanding, and not at all to contempt, does distinguish the English as a race apart, whatever their rank or grade, and was by far the most outstanding characteristic, good or bad, in the people of my Borough. Indeed, of all those with whom I came in contact during my stay, I cannot remember half a dozen in which it was conspicuously absent.

You might find this curiously evidenced in those professional football matches to which I have referred. Although the great crowds which attend them were desperately anxious for the victory of their own side —especially those who had backed it or " tipped " it in a competition—they were at least as ready to cheer a piece of good play by an opponent as by one of their own men, or to protest violently at a piece of sharp practice, even though one of their own players were responsible. " Regrettable " incidents there may have been in districts where feeling ran high, and where blood was hotter than in Romwell, but in all the games I witnessed, and, as I was told, in the vast majority of others, the impartiality of the crowd was invariable. If we contrast it with the violent abuse—most of it, of course, only obeying an established convention—hurled at the opposing side by spectators of an American baseball match, at the really serious attempts to murder the referee—one of which I myself wit-

nessed—which have been known to occur at football matches in the South of France, or the amazingly unchivalrous behaviour of a Spanish or South American crowd at a bull-fight, the English attitude is all the more remarkable. I speak with some feeling, having, with a friend, narrowly escaped being lynched myself at a "funcion" in Mexico City. A very admirable bull had succeeded in tossing the toreador over his head. Naturally pleased, my friend and I cried "Bravo, Toro!" and otherwise manifested our admiration. In Romwell we should have been supported by ten thousand voices. In Mexico only the presence of mind of a policeman, who hustled us away by a back stairway before the crowd could catch us, saved our lives!

When I was in Romwell, an almost daily incident of the newspapers was the lament that this, that or the other sporting "record" had been lost to England, with appropriate comment as to the degeneracy of our young men. Not only was such criticism unfair; it was foolish, as condemning what was really one of the points about which England had most reason to be proud—that, in amateur events at any rate, the professional point of view, "Be honest if you can, but win in any case!" had not penetrated very deeply, and that our young men still realised that a sporting event was, after all, a game and not an occasion for money-making alone. Pessimists have told me that the intrusion of women in all forms of sports had tended to lower the national standard, in the same way that to play chess habitually with an opponent weaker than yourself tends to lower the standard of your own play.

But such " degeneracy " was very much more apparent than real, being largely the imagined result of that national habit of self-depreciation to which the English are prone and which attaches more importance to one defeat than to a dozen victories. Which is not to say that it is not a wise and a profitable habit, for while the exploits of peoples naturally—or of design—given to inordinate boasting are apt to be regarded with unbelieving eyes, even when they happen to be true, those which the English attribute to themselves are clearly beyond suspicion, and accordingly the national reputation for veracity stands high even among England's most carping critics !

I have already spoken of the undue importance attached to pastimes in my Borough and elsewhere, as tending to diminish that devotion to work which was perhaps the most crying need of the time. Granting the evil—I do not think anyone could doubt it—it was at least very much better that the young men, and for that matter young women, should devote their leisure to perfecting their muscles rather than to merely watching other people do so. The *rôle* of loafer was not really congenial to Charley Wilson or his friends. Given only a piece of ground, a ball and a bat, they would, almost instantaneously, organise themselves into some kind of a team to play some kind of a game, to play it hard and to play it honestly and in charity with all men. The only pity was that the piece of ground was so difficult to find, and that the alternative of playing in public thoroughfares was inevitably frowned upon by the authorities.

Probably the most generally condemned and at the same time most passionately popular of sports in my time was motor-cycling. It satisfied all the cravings of the young man's bosom. It gave excellent opportunities of showing off and to dash along the streets, to the admiration of feminine beholders, making a monstrous din that could not be overlooked, was a great thing in itself! There was also more than a spice of danger in it which the cautionary warnings of a feminist public opinion had not succeeded in eradicating. Best of all, it looked expensive while really costing nothing at all—as it seemed to the boy when paying his first hire-system instalment, with no thought of the long series of further payments to come. That it entailed being a nuisance, not to say a peril, to others could scarcely be expected to weigh against such joys. Real motoring was, of course, a rapture more difficult to attain for the younger men and, so far as it was becoming more universal even among thrifty seniors, it was to be regarded less as a sport than a necessity, being undertaken for the most part either for business purposes, as by the many commercial travellers, or by the family man taking his wife and children for a week-end spin. As such, it was a social weapon of the first class, and I shall not soon forget the vision of Mrs. Mellon lolling complacently on the back seat of a very splendid car, "the property of a nobleman," as they say in the advertisements, which had been borrowed for the occasion by the nobleman's chauffeur, a friend of her son-in-law as she smiled magnificently upon the passers-by during a fortunate hold-up of the traffic in the High Road.

As you may suppose, the feminine element was very noticeable in everything to do with motoring, and especially motor-cycling. Quite a number of young women, imitating their brothers' example, had, in the beginning, acquired motor-cycles on their own account, though they were in an increasing minority, preferring to sit crouched frog-like on a pillion, their arms clinging about the young man in the driver's seat, as though to show, as one of the Metropolitan magistrates put it at the time, that they were determined not to let the young men get away from them even then! I am bound to say that the young men, being mostly at the age when calf-love is at its most compellant displayed little anxiety to escape, however they might profess it among their fellows!

Tennis, again, was very popular, as exhibited on the many public courts provided by the County Council in their parks and public gardens. The standard of play was not high, largely again owing to feminine devotion, as offering not only an agreeable pastime, but the opportunity for graceful posturing, attractive clothes and alluring head-dresses of fashions initiated by famous feminine champions of the game. Yet even though the most serious "fours" showed a tendency to degenerate into squeaking and giggling matches, it was all to the good, as providing opportunities for fresh air very much superior to even the most expensively artificial aeration of the cinema. Indeed, the only drawback of tennis, as compared to its more masculine rival, cricket—for which the young women cared very much less, perhaps because of the

hardness of the ball and the lack of personal opportunities for starring—was in its opportunities for selfish play and the absence of that inculcation of loyal team work which is its rival's highest quality.

Perhaps naturally, though rather unexpectedly, dancing, which at the time I went to stay in Romwell was a universal craze, was showing decided signs of a "slump" about the time I left. It was, so far as I could judge, never really beloved by the young men—perhaps because of the rather ridiculous *rôle* played by the unpractised dancer—who only went to dances in obedience to the behests of their young women or, it may have been, on the chance of finding an unattached young woman with whom to flirt. The young women, feeling this reluctance on the part of their partners and to some extent the lack of partners at all—for, as I have already said, they were always in the majority at the cheap public dances—were gradually losing their interest in it, for we may take it that, apart from the religious element, which was not at all in question in my Borough, the one real spur to dancing is the sex-incentive and the mimic gratification of those sexual instincts which must be so severely smothered in workshop or office life.

Waterloo, we have been told, quite erroneously, but on very high authority, was won upon the playing fields of Eton; I am not at all sure that a much greater struggle—that of the whole future of England—is not even now being prepared for upon the public playing-fields.

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-SECOND

A BRICK AND MORTAR EDEN

I HAVE told you that Mr. Harnett disapproved on general principles of the County Council Parks, as being part of the growing tendency towards the provision of free bread and circuses to which he attributed the decadence of the younger generation. Yet he so far vindicated his national reputation for inconsistency as to accept his share of those bedding-out plants which the Council gave away to all residents in the Borough who cared to apply for them at the end of the season. And with them as a basis he built up a really beautiful garden of his own, incorporating the tiniest of greenhouses, with a vine producing most desirable Black Hamburghs which, instead of selling, as he might easily have done, he preferred to devote to the patients of his hospital, reserving a few bunches for his friends. His garden was characteristic of Romwell as being dependent upon a house sheltering three families beside himself and the landlady, in as squalid a side-street off the Casaubon Road as Romwell had to show.

I sometimes thought that the most gracious of all the Romwell qualities was the love of and almost instinctive understanding of flowers—as, for that matter, of animals and birds—evident in so many of its

people. In this they but showed their Englishry, for out of half a hundred countries I cannot remember one which approached it either in its gardens or its love of them. New York, as we know, is handicapped climatically ; the gardens of Paris are noteworthy only because their formalism is such a determined denying of Nature ; in Berlin, despite political changes, every flower must still resign itself to be trained according to the Rules of War ; in tropical countries, perhaps because Nature is herself so lavish, she is left to work her miracles unaided. Only in England, and not least in Romwell, is she accepted as a friend, perhaps in tribute to the memories of the real country from which our fathers came, perhaps in atavistic recognition of the beauty that once was Romwell, when it was miles from the centre of the great city, a place of whispering streams and water-meadows.

If you wished to realise my Borough's love for flowers, you had only to study the market string-bags of her housekeepers returning home from their weekly shopping. Scarcely one of them but had its bunch of blossoms, larger or smaller according to the season and the depth of the household purse ; you had but to notice the eager faces of men and women alike glued against the windows of the seed and bulb merchants when the promise of spring urged them to display the dull brown bulbs that were so full of promise and romance ; you had but to pass down one of the poorest streets and count the pathetic little front "gardens," no bigger than blankets, and as likely as not wired over like so many rabbit hutches to preserve the few poor

daffodils or daisy roots that struggled there against an unkind fate.

Of all the efforts of " social workers " I know none that came nearer to my heart than the furthering, by precept, prize and example, of the caring for gardens and window boxes ; not only did they tend immensely to the beautifying of the meanest streets, but they had a civilising influence far greater than the example of all the " Settlements " put together. And how ready Nature was to co-operate, despite the handicaps of dirt and dust and smoke you might judge from one garden, which I knew very intimately and loved as dearly and remember the more tenderly because it can never again be more than a memory.

When I last passed down Barnard's Grove there was a huge notice board before Mrs. Thwaites' house and its adjoining neighbours, announcing their coming sale by auction as suitable for a row of shops. I have never dared to pass that way again ; long ere this time of writing, the dreaded though inevitable change must have taken place, and I prefer to dream of it only as it was.

At one time the garden covered an acre, and even in my time, in its partly truncated condition, there was half an acre or more of it. Now I must tell you further that Mrs. Thwaites, like every other householder in my Borough who had the chance, was an enthusiastic gardener, though somewhat handicapped by the luxuriance of her figure. Being a woman of sense, she early realised that it were hopeless for her to grapple with so wide a terrain and confined herself to

a small plot of perhaps a dozen square yards, immediately behind the house, which she kept in apple-pie order, though her taste, running towards scarlet geraniums, calceolarias and lobelias, was not quite the same as my own.

The rest of the garden, at the time I became one of her tenants was, I suppose, a picture of what my Borough will look like in the days when New Zealanders muse over the spot where once was Romwell Town Hall. You might have supposed that with so many, presumably willing, hands beneath her roof, she would have divided it up among her lodgers in as many allotments and perhaps obtained thereby a constant provision of fresh flowers and fruit and vegetables as did her first predecessors. But, as I have told you, she was a very wise woman, and instead ruthlessly reserved it for her own use, or neglect, for, as she told me, there is nothing in all the world that causes more ill-feeling between lodgers than the joint enjoyment of a garden. So I took it as a high compliment, that after we had got to know each other, she volunteered to give me the free use of it and even, to prevent jealousy on the part of those less favoured, educed the fiction that I paid her a substantial sum per week for it.

To enter it was at first really as difficult as to make your way through the jungles of Ituama or Cichenitze. It had been left to Nature for some fifteen years, and in those years she had played the queerest pranks with it. Beyond the little lawn that Mrs. Thwaites cherished was an almost impenetrable barrier of brushwood

masking an overgrown woodland that was once an orchard, so that cherry and peach and apple trees struggled for their lives against the assaults of elder bushes and evil weeds. There was a noble catalpa, that must have been a century old, and a great fig tree covering twenty yards of wall. It was a very paradise for birds ; at a later time when my clearance allowed some estimate, I counted six separate species feeding together, not including the ubiquitous sparrows or starlings, nor for that matter an extremely abusive parrot which had, I take it, escaped from somewhere and resided in my jungle for a whole summer, eating pears and apples before they ripened and terrifying the fiercest cats with his ceaseless flow of profanity. I do not suppose there is anything very remarkable in it, though to a newcomer it was surprising enough, but in that one patch of neglected garden, within three miles of London Bridge, I have seen, on one morning, blackbird, thrush, starling, chaffinch, two species of tits, a tree-creeper, a yellow-ammer and a goldfinch. Foxgloves grew thickly under the trees, and there was in springtime a wealth of bluebells, survivals of an earlier cultivation.

Into this wilderness I plunged eagerly, and with Mr. Harnett's skilled help cut in the very heart of it as pleasant a " secret orchard " as you need wish for. The first owner had chosen to have a small green-house there and, in prospecting we came upon what had once been its red-tiled floor. Out of this Mr. Harnett, with the skill that is born of love, built up the quaintest of Dutch gardens, where tulips flourished

to admiration. The overhanging branches of the catalpa made an ideal bower for working; the surrounding thickets cut off every sight or sound of London; in the Spring it was a perfect glory of pear and apple-blossom.

It was in the garden that I loved and lost (I lingered on in my Borough long after my business there was finished, out of love for it) that I first disproved for myself the hoary fiction that the London smoke is fatal to roses. Mr. Harnett had told me of it previously, and in his little Eden grew some of the finest roses you need wish to see; they were not perhaps of the most delicate or costly varieties, though I believe he gained more than one prize for them at flower shows with a wider field of offering than the Borough, and many were the patients in the wards of his hospital whose eyes brightened at the reflection of their beauty. Nor was he alone in his love for the English flower. Those of my Borough mostly came from Holland, by the way, so cheaply that you could buy quite satisfactory bushes of them at our local threepenny and sixpenny stores, as I know because I bought a number of them myself. As fast as my friend, Mr. Swain, and his brother builders could pull down the fine old houses of a past age—first cutting down every one of the trees in which they were embowered—and set up their rows of little semi-detached "ideal homes" with a garage where you would expect the drawing-room to be—the very first sign that they were tenanted was a "crazy" pavement leading to the front door with three or four rose trees on either side of it, according to the

length of the front garden. There they flourished exceedingly, and though they could not take the place of the murdered forest trees, at least they made the new street pleasant enough so long as you kept your eyes on them and avoided what lay behind.

Romwell amateur gardeners were not very imaginative or original—in gardening, as in other things, they preferred to "follow the crowd." But until I was initiated into the pleasant mystery of the County Council gifts of bedding-plants, I was puzzled why, exactly at the same time of the same year every Adam and Eve should discover a passion say for Indian pinks or scented stocks or some particular variety and colour of begonias. I am afraid, too, that the universal passion for "crazy pavements" which spread like a pestilence, not only throughout the newly developed parts of my Borough, but in every new suburb of them all, was born in the fertile brain of the garden-artists who laid out the parks, for Romwell Park was as great a sinner in this respect as the most jerry-built little demesne. It even allowed "crazyness" to creep, serpent-like, into the Old English Garden which, with the possible exception of my own jungle, was the most beautiful in all the district. I used to go there myself as often as I could to follow the seasons as they were there reflected, and after a time I discovered that I was always recognising the same faces and was but one of a whole congregation of worshippers who drew, I doubt not, the greatest happiness and inspiration of their drab lives from it. Especially striking was the number of young folk, even "unescorted" mites of

four and five among us, and how they looked with something approaching awe at the vision of a New Heaven and a New Earth unfolding all about them. It was very good to know that the London parks served a better purpose than as mere promenades or cricket grounds or even sanatoria for sick minds and bodies. I only wish that the Elementary Schools conducted by the same authority could have provided lessons so inspiring or so beautiful or so well-taught.

I remember talking, in a tram-car, to a very tired little girl who was on her way home from some country school-treat. She held clutched in a small and dirty paw a little bunch of field flowers, one of which, a very dead buttercup, she was so kind as to present to me. In thanking her for it, I said something about her "flowers." "Oh, no," she cried, the feminine desire to instruct overcoming even her sleepiness. "These aren't flowers. These are the things that grow in the country." In so saying she touched on a curious distinction Romwell was apt to make between flowers growing in a field and others lying on a barrow. Perhaps it was not far wrong, seeing how far removed from its natural shape and form and colour is the product of our gardener's skill; it may have been that the people of my Borough were unconsciously trying to reconcile their love for flowers with their dislike of the country—a dislike which the cheapness and convenience of the motor-coach was only slowly beginning to overcome. I think it was because they instinctively regarded the flowers of the

market barrows as city-born like themselves that they loved them so much and distinguished so carefully between them and the wild things to be found in the lonely lanes, and not because they were bigger and brighter and more easily come by. Primroses and bluebells were, of course, eagerly sought for in the Spring, and carried home in huge bundles upon the handle-bars of every bicycle ; but the search for them —with the consequent danger of their ultimate extirpation anywhere within fifty miles of a city was due, I think, rather to mass-suggestion resultant from Press enthusiasm than to any great appreciation of their beauty. The people of my Borough would as soon, if not sooner, have raided geraniums and calceolarias in the County Council parks, were they not accepted as tabu.

Some of us are so apt to confuse a garden with a countryside that we forget the distinction which was made at the very beginning of things, when Eden was specially walled off from the surrounding country as a better dwelling-place for mankind. The folk of Romwell realised the difference, and that they at the same time loved flowers and took no pleasure in the country was less paradoxical than it seemed. For a flower in the country is no more than a pretty weed ; in London it is a message and a promise. A little Romwell boy was knocked down by a motor-lorry and very badly injured. When the ambulance had carried him away to hospital, half conscious, it was noticed that he was continually asking for something —muttering a request which could not clearly be

understood. They thought he was asking for his mother, his father, his little sister. But it was for none of them. At last a quick-eared nurse realised that it was for a garden he was pleading. At first it was taken as the mutterings of delirium, but when his mother was told she understood—and his garden was brought to him. It was an old, dried-up geranium, with but one faded leaf upon its drooping stem, that grew in a little pot on the window-sill of the one room they inhabited in Sentiman's Buildings. When it was brought to him he smiled and tried to snuggle it against his little crushed breast, and died very peacefully.

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-THIRD

THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

One of the most striking relics of the Romwell past used to stand about half-way up Barnard's Hill, which was the continuation of the Grove on the other side of the High Road. Towards the end of the last century Barnard's Hill must have been one of the pleasantest rural retreats near London, more eligible than the Grove, as standing on higher ground and giving views over the London valley that even now are suggestively beautiful. It was lined with perhaps a dozen houses of mellow Georgian brick, standing in their own wide grounds, with lawns, greenhouses, stable-yards and I know not what other appendages to the comfort of the wealthier bourgeoisie. Even those of less spacious ages—the early and mid-Victorian—which later sprang up among them were so hidden by creepers and embowered in tall trees as to be inoffensive. Quite the most gracious were three mansions—that were once one Manor House—the oldest of them all, and said without any probable reason, to have been designed by Inigo Jones for the Kirby-Romwells, then Lords of the Manor. Whether or no, the Manor House was the oldest of any pretensions in all the district, and no doubt regarded the building of the Grove on the slopes below it as a

horrid infringement of its privacy and a sign of revolutionary tendencies. As marks of their former grandeur, the three houses still shared between them gardens that had once formed a little park of perhaps ten acres, overgrown with ancient trees.

Perhaps a couple of generations back a wealthy City man acquired the property, trisected it, let off the wings, and himself lived in the central building. When I first knew it, one of the wings was empty, with bleached notice boards before it adumbrating how long it had been to let or for sale. The other was divided up between three families, but in the centre still lived, in something of ancient state, an old gentleman, descendant of the original occupier, who had refused to flee before the proletarian tide creeping upwards from the marshlands. To the last he drove out daily in an ancient barouche, drawn by two fat ancient horses—he was a widower—dressed in the costume of the days of Gladstone, with a high black choker and a Brougham plaid shawl about his shoulders. Shortly after the European War he died, and his heirs, surrendering to death-duties or other disabilities, put up the whole place for sale.

It stood empty for years, being too large for post-war purses, and lacking modern conveniences, and I used often to invent errands that would take me up the hill, for the sheer pleasure of looking at it. One day a new and glaring notice board appeared above the holly hedge, announcing the approaching development of a "residential estate." A month later the housebreakers arrived. All unsuspecting, I passed

down the hill one day, to see a posse of sturdy men perched perilously on the old walls, hurling down great blocks of ancient brickwork with the zest human beings bring to the work of destruction. I passed that way no more—no more, at least, until some months later Mrs. Mellon introduced me to Mr. Swain in the Saloon Lounge of the "Grey Mare."

Mr. Swain was then a small builder; judging from his activities on Barnard's Hill he must soon thereafter have become, I think, a large one. He was a friendly soul, and we fell into talk about the housing shortage, and he told me of his new and successful enterprise, and of the beautiful houses he was building in "Manor Way," and how they were being sold even before the foundations were laid. I think he may at first have regarded me as a possible client, so complacently did he dwell upon the advantages his houses offered, costing as they did no more than six hundred and ninety-five pounds freehold, possession to be had after a first small payment, and the balance as rent. He was something of a humorist too, for he added gleefully—though only after he had realised that I should never be customer of his—that houses sold twice as fast if you priced them at six hundred and ninety-five pounds instead of seven hundred pounds, for that as the drapers had taught us six shillings and eleven pence three-farthings seems to a purchaser nearer six shillings than seven—and so it was with house-seekers. There was the pride of the creator in him as well, and when he pressed me warmly to come and see him, I realised that complacency directed the invitation and not greed

of gain. So, very much against my will, I agreed to go, and on the appointed day we met at Manor Way.

I have seen a good many "Garden Villages" and "Ideal Suburbs" in my day, but whether they were the shingled homes of Long Island, the neo-art "Bauernhaüser" of Düsseldorf, or the red rash that covers the Home Counties, I have never seen one that appealed to me as a possible home. I used at first to attribute this reluctance to some error in taste; later I put it down to their inevitable newness, believing, as I now think erroneously, that in half a century or so, when trees have grown up about them and the rawness of their angularity is gone, our grandsons may find them possible enough. But it was not until I came across what I believe to be the ugliest in the world—the "lôtissement" of Bleufontaine, outside Paris, and found that it was nevertheless to my mind the most habitable of any, that I realised the truth. Bleufontaine owes much of its unrivalled horror to the fact that it is built upon no sort of plan at all. An old estate has been divided up into plots varying in size; these have been sold—at absurdly small prices, be it said—to the house-hungry proletariat of Paris, to do exactly as they will with their own. There are no sewers, no water pipes, no gas, no made roads; none were expected. The purchaser follows a course elsewhere unusual. He starts by dwelling in a tent, which, as funds permit, becomes a dog-kennel, then a wooden shed of two divisions. At long last he obtains a load of cement blocks or tubular brick, or artificial stone—whichever happens to be cheapest

—and starts to build himself a real room. Very often, he never gets any further than the one room, which remains, with its raw, unfinished outer walls and tar-paulined roof, as a permanent monument to French thrift. Sometimes he adds at long intervals another room or two ; occasionally he completes it—perhaps as the outcome of some lucky speculation—and revels in owning the ugliest house in all France. Despite which, Bleufontaine is to my mind more habitable than—it is for you to select the most desirable Garden Suburb in England and complete the sentence.

The reason why I prefer Bleufontaine is the same which would lead me to buy a puppy for a pet, rather than a grown dog ; that I can mould the puppy to my ideas of what a pet should be, while the dog is the result of another man's training. Every ugly little shack, every tubular-brick wall, every ill-fitting window-sill, is the child of its owner, the result of thought and care, the work, in most cases of his own hands, the expression of his own taste, such as it is. Compare it now with Manor Way.

Both started alike, as it were, from the scratch of a bare muddy wilderness. In both every tree was sedulously destroyed, every blade of grass rooted up, the bare earth left as the canvas upon which the build-ing-artist was to draw. In the one case the artist was a couple of hundred Frenchmen of the lower middle class ; in the other it was Mr. Swain. Neither employed an architect, regarding him as a superfluous expense. The Frenchman got his ideas out of his head, approximating as nearly as possible to his ideal

of what a home should be ; Mr. Swain got his out of an extremely useful book, produced for just such an emergency, which provided him with a choice of a large number of villas, with their elevations, designs, ground plans, measurements, quantities of material and costs. He selected that which, considering locality and other details, offered him the greatest obtainable profit and he set to work to erect that villa two hundred times over. He did it very well—he was extremely conscientious within his limitations ; he had to provide drains and lighting and a water supply, because the local authorities insisted on it ; but he provided good material as well and as good workmanship as the competitive price he could expect allowed.

They were extremely good little houses, all things considered ; there was certainly not a house in Bleufontaine that could match them in any respect whatever. They were built to last for fifty years or so, and I have no doubt that properly cared for they will do so. Each had three bedrooms and a sitting-room, a bathroom and a kitchen, and some of them had a garage instead of one of the rooms. The rooms were uncomfortably small, compared to those of older, more spacious days, but there were five into which to pack a family instead of one or at most two in a lodging house. The walls were thin—you could hear everything that happened in your neighbour's house, even to his tapping his pipe against his mantel-piece—but they were as thick as could be provided for the money. They were semi-detached—which, perhaps because of the noise question, was a more popular

form among the smaller house-buyer than " terrace houses." That is to say, there was a narrow slit, perhaps three feet across, between alternate houses. There was a garden in front, complete with crazy pavement, perhaps ten feet long, and there was another garden behind, perhaps ten yards square. Except that some houses were left-handed and some right, they were all exactly alike, even to the front-door handles. Each had a gable, painted yellow, with laths, painted black, laid across its plaster face to represent timbers of old oak. Each had a bow window on the red-brick ground floor and each had " cathedral," which is to say coloured glass, panels in the front door. Each coloured panel was in exactly the same relative position in each front door.

Some individuality showed itself in those inhabited —already, at the time of my visit, the greater number. Some had three pairs of rose trees lining the crazy paving in the front garden, some had four pairs. Some had a laburnum sapling in the corner of the garden furthest from the gate, some had a red hawthorn. Each had its name. Among them were " Cosicotte," " Miona," " The Shack," " Dinaworrie " and "SaiWen," pleasant proof that humour replaces dignity in the minds of the new houseowner. It is true that there were also a " Chatsworth " and a " Manorville."

Although an infinitesimal minority might, like myself, prefer Bleufontaine as a place of residence rather than Manor Way—believing, as we might honestly if mistakenly believe, that it is better to choose your own collar than to imitate that of another

man, we should have found little sympathy from Mr. Swain or the freeholders of Manor Way.

Mr. Swain, not or not only because he had made and expected to make money out of them, really admired his houses with all his heart. He was justifiably enthusiastic about the good work and material he had put into them ; their beauty appealed irresistibly to his æsthetic sense. He told me, and there were tears not far from his eyes, that when he thought of the dirty old houses that had stood there and compared them with what he had set up in their place he could feel that his life had not been wasted. He showed me ornamental incidents, particularly a circular terra-cotta rosette in the middle of each gable which he had added to the original design, at considerable and irrecoverable expense to himself, to increase their beauty. I could not doubt his sincerity ; he knew that he had nothing to gain from me. I met him several times afterwards and I had never the least doubt that he was a conscientious, honest and truthful man, and that to him his houses in Manor Way came very near to those many mansions of which we read in the Scriptures.

Nor was he alone in his admiration. By a happy accident, as we were picking our way across the puddles which filled most of the roadway, " not yet taken over by the Council," as Mr. Swain explained, a young lady who was doing something to a rosebush in one of the front gardens recognised me. She proved to be a friend of Minny Wallace, who was a friend of Mrs. Hunt, who had once lodged with Mrs

Mellon, and we had there met on the stairs. Because she was full of the glory of her home, she stood little on ceremony, and invited me to enter and admire, with a pride that was pleasant to see.

It was certainly a very complete little home, entirely furnished from door-mat to bedspreads with a lavishness no young couple would have dreamed of in my mother's time. There were the brightest of possible carpets and a noble suite of drawing-room furniture which filled the little sitting-room and overflowed into the kitchen. There was a shining aluminium *batterie de cuisine;* there was an opulent brass bed, covered with an " art " silk " art " eiderdown, nearly filling the best bedroom. There was a gramophone and a wireless set; there were curtains of blue workhouse sheeting in all the front windows, to which Mrs. Heald especially drew my attention, contrasting them favourably with those of Nottingham lace in " Homenest " just over the road. Nottingham lace, she told me, was so old-fashioned, and I noticed that, in Manor Way at least, it was fighting a losing battle against workhouse sheeting. There was a very impressive " tantalus " on the sideboard in the sitting-room, flanked by an equally splendid biscuit barrel; there were pictures on the walls, including two life-size photographic enlargements of Mr. and Mrs. Heald on their wedding-day. Whatever the standard of taste, which is, after all, a matter for the individual, there could be no possible doubt of the higher standard of furnishing as between Mrs. Heald and, say, her mother. Her well-wishers—remembering the com-

pelling advertisements of Sir Manual Peck—might perhaps doubt whether such splendour could ever be paid for "out of income" by a clerk in a railway goods office, leaving possible "encumbrances" out of the question. Even so, I am not sure that the radiant happiness of Mrs. Heald in the splendid appointments of her bridal home may not rank as a sufficient set-off when the balance of her life-happiness comes to be cast, against the discomfort she may be put to before they are finally paid for, whether in fact Sir Manual may not, on balance, deserve almost as well of the world as he claims in his advertisements, despite all the head-shakings of the economist.

As, having said goodbye to "Ethelville" and its chatelaine, I walked down Barnard's Hill I found myself growing always more grateful to Mr. Swain and to Mrs. Heald for having taught me a lesson it is not easy to master. It did not come to me at once, of course. Instead I found myself thinking about Mrs. Partington and that splendid mop with which she strove to repel the Atlantic Ocean.

Mrs. Partington was perfectly justified in her mop-work. No one wishes to see the little house or world in which he has rejoiced for long years invaded by nasty waves that must spoil the carpets and set the furniture floating about into all sorts of unfamiliar places. Especially was she admirable in that, realising, as she must have realised, that her battle was lost even before it was joined, she yet nobly persevered, in the forlorn hope that, as she had learned at Sunday School was not unprecedented, a miracle might

happen at the eleventh hour and drive back the advancing flood. Let us hope it did, at ebb-tide an hour or two later, and so confirmed her in her faith.

As I contrasted the one rich old merchant with the Brougham plaid with the two hundred or so young Mrs. Healds who had taken his place I found myself wondering whether Mrs. Partington, however admirable spiritually, was really justified, whether by seeking to set back the hands of the clock we come any nearer to reversing the flight of time. If not, there are many hundreds of Mrs. Partingtons among us who are wasting their energies quite lamentably. At the time of which I write—and later—part, and that the most voluble part of the population of England was lifting up its voice, using every possible channel of expression, to condemn the taste, the way of life, the greater and the lesser moralities of the other and the larger part. Because I was brought up in a tradition which found the old Manor House a thing of beauty, I identified myself mentally with the old merchant born a hundred years ago in condemning—as he certainly would have condemned—the two hundred Mrs. Healds of Manor Way. The gable-laths, aping ancient timbers, which adorned the face of "Ethelville" seemed to me rather horrible, not only because they were out of place, but also demonstrably sham. To Mrs. Heald they were beautiful, partly because Mr. Swain had told her so and she believed him, partly because they were new and suggested prosperity, partly because they spoke to her of that sublimation of the home ideal with which, ever since her infancy,

she had been familiarised on Christmas cards and similar domestic idylls. That she was right and I, with all the other Mrs. Partingtons, manifestly wrong, there is no doubt whatever.

To many, if not all the older generation after the war, there was something really terrible in the building-cancer which so fast ate up the countryside of England, in the remodelling of the ancient streets and cities amidst which they had grown up, in the universal throwing down of landmarks. It was useless to remind them that their fathers felt the same horror at the birth of the new conditions amidst which they themselves were raised and which they learned to love. For, after all, there was a difference between their plight and that of their sires. Always thitherto had been a slow developing, an evolution, one standard growing slowly up on the decay of another, one tradition enduring even while its outer expression changed with the changing people who perpetuated it. Now, suddenly as the onrush of a tidal wave, poor Mrs. Partington saw everything that she had known and loved swept ruthlessly from her at a blow. Not thus was it in the old days when the dwellers in the Manor House, looking out towards the distant smoke-veil on the river, saw one morning the roof of the new Barnard's Grove topping the trees. That was an intrusion on their cherished solitude, perhaps, but it was after their own tradition. Its architecture was based upon the same long memories as was the older mansion; its inmates based their manners upon the same inheritance; the Grove and its inhabitants

worshipped the same gods as did the Manor House.

When, as the slow years passed, other houses grew slowly along the Grove, and slowly climbed the leafy hill towards the Manor House, there remained always the same respect for old tradition. Inevitable changes came, but so gradually that they were hardly realised. It was possible to speak with tolerance of alterations, even of improvements, effected always in deference to those yet older which had been growing up ever since the first of the Partingtons saw that the land was good and conquered it. In all those ages of tradition there was never a moment when you could set down your finger and say, " Here was a break ! Here ended the Old Order ! Here began the New ! " Political revolutions there were; and religious old buildings rotted and new ones took their place ; old roads needed remaking, but they followed the old trackways ; William begat Henry, who begat John, who begat Robert, who begat William again, and every one of them all honoured his fathers that his days might be long in the land and modelled—even where he modified—his life and his beliefs upon what he learned from them.

Then, suddenly, crushingly, on the heels of a victorious war, when the Partington tradition had triumphed as always over an alien iconoclast, came the incredible deluge. The Manor House and all it stood for vanished in a night. In its place sprang up, mushroom-like, rows upon rows of little false-faced villas, housing hundreds of unfamiliar newcomers

where one had reigned so long in solitary grandeur. They were incredible to the Partingtons of England, these New Men. They sprang from nowhere. No one had heard of them, seen, imagined them before. They spoke an unknown tongue; they lived unfamiliar lives; they laughed at the old standards of beauty, of culture, of morality. They ignored the old traditions even when they were aware of them. They seemed countless. The cities must be enlarged, the very roads widened to make room for them; their new dwellings swept, pest-like, across the fields and turned to urban horror what was once the fairest countryside in all the world. They were a portent incredible, a phenomenon unheard of; a new Conquest of the Barbarians sprung suddenly out of nothingness.

Can we wonder that all the Partingtons gave one simultaneous shriek of horror, that, with one accord, they set themselves to clamorous protest, with that persevering unimaginativeness that has been their proud hall-mark since the days of Canute, to demand that the old landmarks be set up and the new ones cast down; that Manor Way be rooted up and the old Manor House re-erected where it stood; that the desecrated countryside be consecrate again as a desert Paradise where only Partingtons might rove in cultured solitude; that the roads be narrowed to the width of the old cart-tracks to bar the passage of the New Vandals; that everything new and hideous and restless be forbidden for all time, and all that was old and gracious and leisurely be sacrosanct; that the

Old Men rise from their graves and drive back the New to the slums from which they came, as it was in the beginning and should be ever after.

And even as they clamoured very boldly, though with Heaven knew what shrinking hearts, came down from that Heaven, as it seemed in answer to their prayers, a Portent. Alas—it was not that Island Goddess for whom they prayed, totem of the tribe of all the Partingtons, serene, calm, beautiful, ruling sea and land with the gracious nonchalance of a Lady of birth and breeding. Instead, Another, stout and scant of breath, speaking a travesty of the language they had made their own, wearing a travesty of the garb they cherished, advancing resistless as the traction-engine on which her form was moulded, crushing old shibboleths beneath her graceless feet, brandishing the string-bag that was her Oriflamme, uncouth, good-humoured, relentless—Britannia's supersessor, Mrs. Mellon!

You cannot be surprised that the Partingtons were slow to call upon her.

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-FOURTH

CELARE ARTEM

As the wedding of Lettuce Mellon drew near, the problem of wedding presents became of importance. In my Borough the " useful " present was wisely preferred to the merely ornamental. Thus Mrs. Mellon purposed for her daughter the handsome gift of a suite of saddleback chairs and sofa, upholstered in a gorgeous crimson, with six instalments paid in advance. Mrs. Bob Patten was presenting a complete set of aluminium pots and pans. Mrs. Murgeon, who was Mrs. Mellon's sister, and in looks, her twin, remembering her own romantic youth, was for a compromise, such as a pair of handsomely framed love-scenes for the drawing-room. Frankly admitting that she had little technical knowledge of the fine arts, and did not want to run to more than fifteen shillings at the outside, she invited me to accompany her to the Fine Art Department of Haselstone's in the High Road, to assist in her selection.

Finding nothing among the pictures, framed in English gold though they were, sufficiently sentimental for the occasion, she " compromised," as she put it, on a very artistic Art fire-screen of glass handsomely framed in bamboo, with a design of bulrushes very chastely depicted on the glass panel,

and only costing fifteen and eleven-three, sale price. I think the " sale " was more apparent than real, for I never passed the shops in the High Road at a time when there was not a " sale " at one or more of them, though there was no evident difference in the respective prices. Which must not be taken as detracting from the value, artistic or otherwise, of Mrs. Murgeon's wedding-gift.

There can never have been a place or period where the word " Art " was so frequently invoked or the arts so persistently neglected as was post-war Romwell. It was applied to every conceivable commodity, from silk stockings to travelling trunks. Its original meaning, carefully glossed over in such connections, was artificial, which was very much more appropriate, seeing that the Higher Standard insisted that everything be as similar as possible to the purchases of Dukes, at prices more appropriate to the wages of Dustmen. Not only were women's " art " silk stockings artificial; so were men's " art " flannel shirts. You could buy " art " pearl necklaces at four three farthings, which were not made of pearls, and did not pretend to be. You could buy " art " oil paintings at anything from one and eleven-three upwards which were neither painted nor in oils, but were quite as satisfactory in every way. You could buy all kinds of " art " cosmetics, from " art " lipsticks to " art " obesity cures, which looked exactly like the products of the rue de la Paix, but were not, at threepence a packet. You could buy " art " paper handkerchiefs and " art " paper table-napkins and

" art " paper tablecloths, and, for all I know to the contrary, " art " paper blankets and " art " paper pillow-cases. You could buy " art " linen collars that were made of india-rubber and " art " ivory billiard balls that were made of milk. During the worst sufferings in blockaded Germany there cannot have been more " ersatz " commodities on the local markets, or more popular. I have a pair of " art " ebony brushes with an " art " tortoiseshell comb in an " art " leather case, given to me as a Christmas present by a Romwell friend. There is not an atom of ebony or tortoiseshell or leather about them—neither seller, nor giver, nor recipient thought there was, or pretended so to think, thanks to the magic word " art." They were really excellent value, and, as I say, I have them to this day.

The word " Art " having acquired a meaning so distinctive, it was less surprising that, in its original sense, it was not recognisable in Romwell. It might be going too far to say that, as in the classic instance of the Icelandic snakes, there was no Art in my Borough ; it required a very keen and tolerant eye to discern it.

As in the other Londons, it was frequently invoked by those who thought there was any profit to be found in the invocation, sometimes in unexpected ways. In the local cinemas we were often given glimpses of it, by the introduction of " artist's " studios—such as no artist outside Hollywood or Bedlam ever dreamed of, it is true. Their real, as apart from their professed, end, was to admit the introduction of " artist's models "

as nearly naked as the police would allow. However "artistic," this frequent recourse to the element of lip-licking nastiness, by the presentation of nearly naked women taking part in "orgies"—carefully "blacked out" before anything happened to which the authorities could take exception, was, I always thought, commercially a mistake, so far as Romwell was concerned. However alluring to the semi-Oriental mind of a Hollywood film magnate, it did not really attract the preponderatingly feminine audiences of Romwell, who, enduring the nastiness of the American film because they had no choice in the matter, really preferred those which had some other interest than mere sexual suggestion. Nevertheless, the cinemas of my Borough were not without their artistic promise for the future, for some such reason as the following.

At the time of which I write, the arts, music, painting, sculpture, literature and the rest, were at a low level throughout the country, as a result of the war. The generation which should have carried on the great English traditions was for the most part exterminated. Their successors, craftsmen, critics and teachers alike, freed from all discipline or authority, were groping blindly after a tradition of their own, and were in the meantime content to seek their inspiration abroad, so that it is doubtful if one serious work of direct English inspiration was produced during the ten years following the Armistice, in any branch of the arts, which will be remembered fifty years hence. Music was still lost in the negroid cacophonics

of "jazz"; painting borrowed from France the technique of the schoolroom; sculpture shuddered beneath the yoke of Mongolia; literature looked more and more slavishly to Germany. In the reaction from the tense nationalism of war-times, internationalism ran wild in every branch of art in England.

This being so in the more sophisticated Londons, it was not surprising that my puzzled Borough ignored all branches of the arts save "Art." Literature was confined to the branch circulating libraries attached to chemists' or to drapers' shops and devoted chiefly to fiction and the cheaper magazines. The few free public libraries strove, not unworthily to cater for more serious readers, but lack of funds prevented the acquisition of new works to any useful extent and their contents were too miscellaneous to be of great value to the student.

Painting, save in the form of admirable advertisement posters and the "art" reproductions of the drapers, was almost unknown to the generality. I never heard of an exhibition of serious painting in Romwell, and when, in a neighbouring Borough, a retrospective collection of some interest was temporarily brought together in the municipal buildings, the public attendance was negligible. No doubt a closer investigation would have found further instances of interest in painting. Possibly the art-galleries of the West found Romwell patrons as well as did the tea-palaces and the theatres. The mere fact that frame-makers existed and that certain stationers found it profitable to display boxes of water-colour paints in

their windows, pointed to some amateur activity, but it was my ill-fortune not to come across it.

Music, as a business, had a vastly greater following. At a time when the cheapest restaurant felt called upon to serve music with its meals, there was a satisfactory demand for bandsmen ; cinema and theatre orchestras provided employment for many, and so far, mechanical music-making instruments had not become serious competitors to the manual worker. Brass-plates, on villa railings, offered lessons in the piano, violin or singing and, it was to be supposed, found patrons in the neighbouring streets. Serious concerts were necessarily few, and were mostly of the " charity " description, but amateur societies existed for the study and performance of classical works, and however far Romwell might lag behind German or French communities, there was at least some evidence even to the passer-by that she had not entirely abandoned the old claim that the English were, at heart, a musical people.

Of the other arts there is little to be said. Sculpture was naturally non-existent ; engraving, etching, lithography and the like were devoted, where they existed at all, purely to commercial purposes. The legitimate drama was little in evidence. Romwell, unhappily, could boast of no such admirable exterprise as the " Old Vic " ; Romwell playgoers preferred a visit to the " West End " as a pleasant overture to their evening's amusement ; local theatres were largely confined to weekly runs of Metropolitan successes, given by touring companies, not usually of the first class. In their death-grips with the conquering

cinema the touring managers too often followed one example set by it, common incidents of their advertisements being such announcements as " Banned by the Burgomaster of Budapest," " The Play that Shocked New York," or " Do not Take your Mother to See This ! "—a policy which did not, I think, add greatly to their receipts.

To a critical eye my Borough might appear, then, not only at a low artistic ebb compared to the other Londons, but, measured against the French, the Chinese, the Mexicans, or even some of the Americans, as having neither artistic standing or ambitions at all. In that debasement lay, I very strongly believe, the real hope for her artistic future.

In my youth I was studio-assistant to a great English painter, one of the very few really English masters since Hogarth. In those days painting was already become a " respectable " profession, young people flocking into it without any particular " vocation," save that it offered an easier life and greater prospects of fortune and honours than, let us say, bricklaying. I can very well remember my master saying that there was little hope that England would ever again produce a really great School of Painting until it was made a a criminal offence to sell, buy or use any of the necessary implements. Coming from the mouth of one who—as he had often recalled to me—had been chased off his farm by the Herefordshire farmer to whose daughter one so ill-considered as a painter had dared to offer marriage, his words remained with me, although, being very young, they had little reality—

and in my Borough, after many years, I found their real inwardness.

The worst fate for the unhappy possessor of the "artistic temperament" is to be ignored. To continue writing or painting—or, for that matter, making trouser-legs—without gaining any public appreciation at all of the good work you have put into it—implies either that you have a strong streak of obstinacy in your character or that you cannot help yourself, that the art which is in you must find expression quite apart from any will of your own. Deliberately to take up painting, for instance, in my Borough, to remain true to it, seeking your inspiration within its borders, would have been and probably still is as severe a test of your artistic sincerity as to endure the imprisonment which my master suggested rather than abandon hope. To be and to be content to be despised and rejected of men, is the touchstone of faith, in other things than religion. So we may take it that when the Romwell School does come to fruition, in a soil so absolutely sterile, it will be composed of very true artists indeed, who paint, not because they will but because they must, who are ready to starve physically —as they certainly will—if but they may preserve their artistic souls.

There are two atmospheres possible to the arts, just as there are two sources from which they spring—the head and the heart. That which comes from the head leaps more quickly at the eyes. It is the more splendid; it is impelled from without, rather than expelled from within. It needs the stimulus of the

understanding sympathiser, of the patron, to reach its full fruition. Great Italian art owes as much to the Medici who fostered it as to any individual painter. For the Latin temperament needs not only an audience, but one which understands. The English, ever since the days of Norman William, have been taught to model themselves and their culture upon the conquering Latin tradition, so that their ideals of art have been modelled upon those of Italy or, later, of France. The arts have been impressed upon them as coming from above, transmitted through their "betters," portents, ideals, to be approached with reverence and awe, incomprehensible to the plain man—the supremest products of a human intellect superior to their own.

That is one very noble aspect of art—but it will never deign to show its face to Romwell. There the arts must come—like all else—from below, born of the earth rather than the heavens. Art in the grand manner was damned in England from the day a foolish King gave it his royal patronage. There is no reason why a Royal Academy should not foster the arts—what were the Medici but Royal patrons? But, drawing its inspiration from the Latin, the classic ideal, as anything in official England was bound to do, fostered the art incomprehensible to Romwell, that which springs fully armed, from the head. Chelsea and St. John's Wood were damned before they were begotten and inevitably—not because they were unworthy, but because they were foreign to the soil.

For that art which is from the heart, for that which alone can ever come to its fruition in Romwell—and

a thousand Romwells—you must forget Royal and official patronage, classical tradition and the splendours of the Ancient Masters. You must go to a simpler, more barbarian stock, younger, more naive. When a village lad composes a posy of wild flowers for his sweetheart, you must realise, he is as truly an artist as was Michelangelo, for he is composing something that shall imperfectly express feelings beyond his own control that he cannot help but express. The great Italians reached the same point by the perfection of their self-control, expressing something they felt it good to express. It needed a Medici to understand perfection as they expressed it; the village girl need understand nothing of her posy except that it contains the heart of her lover.

There were few Medici in Romwell; her atmosphere would have been fatal to them. There were very many sweethearts, everyone of them for the time an artist, the truer because they did not know it. Leonardo, when he made a picture, thought only of the art with which he made it, Barbarus of Romwell only of the message it expressed. There was—and is—little hope for Barbarus and Romwell in the art that comes from the head. She will never produce a modern Raphael or a Reynolds, a Courbet or a Matisse; she could never do more than copy them, very badly. But, left to her own devices and unconfused by injunctions she cannot understand, she may—some day I think she will—produce in its perfection that art which finds expression in the village lad's bouquet. She must abandon all thoughts of the arts

to become artistic; descend to the lowest depths in order to see the stars. At least she is so far on her path that she is preserved from the confusing jargon of the schools; it does not occur to her that Art is a sacred mystery, comprehensible only to its high priests. She sees little difference between the young lady of Chelsea, busily expressing her individuality upon canvas, and the house-painter, giving the best that is in him. She is right in this, as Rubens or Van Eyck knew—but as they can never know who emulate the Masters in Chelsea or Greenwich Village or Montparnasse!

Romwell—and her sisters—had, then, the first and most essential asset towards becoming as great a School of Art as were ever Florence or Siena; she was, artistically, *tabula rasa*. She was hampered by no ritual, no prejudices; she saw no difference in their artistic appeal between a painted fire-screen and a masterpiece by Cézanne. To her the very word "Art" stood for the artificial—to her who knew the Real so very intimately, to her who had so very many in her boundaries ready to give the best that was in them, which is the genesis of all true art.

I was rambling along one of the back streets of my Borough when I came unexpectedly upon an Exhibition of Art. It was very small, and it was housed in a public hall that was attached to a public house. It was chiefly devoted to the efforts of children being educated in local elementary and Church schools, with some assistance from their elders. It comprised the usual childish work—water colour paintings, curiously reminiscent in technique and conception of those

exhibited coincidentally in the fashionable galleries of London and Paris and New York, woolwork, fine needlework, clay modelling and the like. There was little about it to excite remark or stir prophetic hope. Unexpectedly I came upon a minor section, part of that devoted to wood-carving. Some wise teacher, flinging aside tradition, had told the children to carve what they would and as they could. There were all kinds of quaint little abortions, hewn out with penknife or scissor point, little houses, human figures, animals, landscapes. Looking at them carelessly I realised of a sudden that they were, in very truth, Fine Art. They were the expression of something within the artist which otherwise might not be expressed; they differed from a masterpiece of Pheidias only in lack of technical knowledge and mastery of hand. I found myself realising that if only that wise teacher might be encouraged to persevere, if only unimaginative Boards or rule-bound head-mistresses did not insist that the children of Romwell be taught to carve, not as they wished, but as all respectable authorities said they should, there was artistic hope for Romwell after all.

If Medici are needful—and artists must live, unfortunately—there are always Mrs. Murgeon and her fellows. It is the intention rather than the purse that makes the patron, and Mrs. Murgeon, when she gives fifteen and eleven-three for an "art" fire-screen, belongs to the Medici family just as truly as had she, with a wider knowledge, paid a thousand ducats for a Lippi.

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-FIFTH

SOME NEW THING

DURING the European War I saw a ghost.

After the taking of Thiepval, one of the episodes of the Battle of the Ancre, we were waiting to advance upon the Wunderwerk, a complicated trench which crowned the hill beyond it. Shortly before the zero hour the ghost of one of my comrades, whom I had recently seen in another sector of the line, appeared to me, as I would have been ready to swear with absolute conviction, explained the circumstances of his death and gave me various messages to transmit to his sorrowing relatives. I should certainly have performed the sacred duty had I not, before the opportunity came, run up against the original of the ghost—if that be his proper description—alive, unwounded and in the best of health.

I was reminded of this by the stir occasioned in my Borough by the Avon Lane Ghost. The circumstances were not identical. None of the many who were ready to swear they had seen that formidable apparition were so weary, so nerve-racked or so apprehensive as we were during the autumn of 1916. At least the ghosts were similarly unsubstantial; the nine days' wonder of Avon Lane proved to have been caused by a piece of ragged wallpaper flapping across

the opening of a decayed roof in a garret. Nevertheless, it acquired a fame which has no doubt merged into immortality in the records of psychical research.

I first knew of it from the eager lips of Mrs. Wolsey, always avid of some new thing. From her I learned that the Ghost had been seen by small boys while raiding an ancient house, standing in its own forlorn grounds in Avon Lane. The house was of much the same period as those of Barnard's Grove, but, having been submerged in even poorer streets, had long lacked a tenant, and falling into Chancery—as local rumour said—was left to crumble away as the elements would have it.

When first seen, the ghost of a grey face leered down from an upper window. By the time I heard of it from Mrs. Wolsey, who had it from the milkman, who had it from the mother of one of the first discoverers, it had assumed an eighteenth-century costume, a red gash in its throat and chains. The enterprising reporter of an evening paper told us, later in the day, that it was the ghost of an aged female miser murdered by her own daughter. He also told us that the neighbourhood was terror-stricken, that mothers would not let their children attend school lest they be kidnapped by the Ghost, and that enormous crowds were awaiting some new manifestation. This last, though imaginative at the time of printing, soon provided its own proof. Next morning, by which time other newspapers had provided further sensational details, Avon Lane was crowded even to the dislocation of traffic, the interest being shared between reporters, camera men, members of spiritualist societies, harassed

policemen, and such interested amateurs, awaiting sensational developments, as Mrs. Wolsey, the Hon. Molly McAfee and I.

As it happened, an interesting murder took place that night; the reporters hurried away on the new trail; the Borough lost interest, and no one was left to pay homage to the supernatural but optimistic psychists quartering the gloomy grounds in the hope of disinterring some supernatural explanation. After which, as was *de rigueur* on such occasions, the Sunday newspapers filled themselves with superior comments on the credulity of the London crowd.

In this they showed themselves, if good journalists, indifferent psychologists, for the London crowd—including that of Romwell—stood out markedly from those of lesser capitals in its striking lack of credulity. It carried scepticism to the point of credulity indeed, so determined was it not to believe anything but what its own senses verified.

A great newspaper proprietor once told me that, did he care to devote a million pounds and one of his more popular journals to the task, he would engage to convert London to Buddhism within six months. That this might be so, that within the specified time he might have huge crowds flocking towards improvised Buddhist shrines, I can very well believe, as in the wholesale conversion of those crowds. I am equally convinced that not one person of them all—if, at least, he came from my Borough—would be individually converted or pretend to himself that he were. Ninety-nine out of a hundred would join the throng in search of a new

sensation, and would loudly proclaim their conversion in the amiable desire to " promote harmony," and lest they might, as non-believers, be debarred from participation in the new thrill.

For plain, intuitive common-sense, unhampered by any superfluous reasoning power, I would back a Mrs. Mellon or a Charley Wilson against a bench of judges. That they had possibilities of credulity may be true, as that their fathers and grandfathers were as credulous as their neighbours ; by the decade after the Great War they had become entirely sceptical, as the direct result of the repeated disillusionments they had suffered after accepting the unscrupulous propaganda loosed upon them in and out of season. Even then, they showed themselves markedly less gullible than the people, especially, of course, the women, of the more leisured classes. While the nominally educated woman believed implicitly such phantasies as that the enemy devoured their own dead, no one in my Borough accepted them for a moment as anything but an ingenious way of abusing him. They had too intimate a knowledge of real life and real humanity to believe it, and too active a sense of humour not to realise its absurdity. They were, in a word, as incapable of believing it as were the leisured women of calling the enemy, quasi-affectionately, " Jerry."

So, again, with the Russian Bolshevists. At the time of which I write, the middle—and especially the moneyed—classes were clamorous with real terror at what they considered the menace of Russia. It was useless to tell them, what nevertheless anyone who had

ever visited the country or become acquainted with its inhabitants knew perfectly, that the Russians, as to 99 per cent. of them, are Mongoloid savages, of a cultural level little above that of the Central African native, as incapable of forming or persevering in a national policy as so many cheese mites. It was useless to add that the whole of modern Russian history was the story of a struggle between some clever Germans and some cleverer, because more imaginative, Jews; that the Jews had in the end beaten the Germans because they drove back the Russians, not unwilling, to their autochthonic communist tribal customs, which they had been forced to abandon by the foolish German overlords, who insisted on their adopting a veneer of Western civilisation. Or to conclude that there was as much danger of the Russians converting the English to their tribal ideals as there was of the Papuans converting them to cannibalism. To the women of the leisured classes, the " Bolshevists " were a marauding army of superlatively clever devils, liable at any moment to overrun England, carrying universal ruin and destruction in their wake; to Mrs. Mellon they were a music hall joke.

You could not frighten the women of Romwell, however lurid your pictures, despite the fact that they had a sense of property perhaps even keener than that of their wealthier and more foolish sisters. Knowing even less about Russia and the Russians, they yet realised instinctively that the absurdities fathered upon them by propagandists were never likely to appeal to the English, that there was accordingly no danger of

such doctrines spreading in England, and that if the Russians were really capable of endeavouring to conquer the country and to disseminate their doctrines by force, they would find the whole population ranged against them to the last unit.

It was always possible to influence my Borough by propaganda, but you must lead it by flattery, rather than drive it by fear. It was not even necessary that the Mrs. Mellons should believe the flattery. Were it at least a complimentary lie, and one which appealed to their sense of humour, they would accept it while perfectly aware that it was a lie. The wise propagandist based his appeals somewhat as did the capable advertiser. "The Woman's Vote placed England at the Head of the Nations. You are a Woman; therefore you are a born legislator. Of course you are a convinced supporter of Free Trade." Or, "The Mother Rules the World. You are a Mother. When you order your Sons to drink nothing but Gin, They Know that you are Ruling them for their Good!" Just as when you tell a very aged lady that she is still as beautiful as ever she was, she chuckles sceptically and swallows the compliment as a compliment, so Mrs. Mellon swallowed the Free Trade or the gin, believing in them no more than in other panaceas, but because she liked to be told, directly or by implication, that she was important and capable, and, above all, powerful, even though she knew perfectly well that she was none of these things.

This saving cynicism made the English crowd very different to most foreign mobs. Any crowd is

terrible ; that of Romwell, even when so stirred that the mind of the individual was merged in that of the mass, was among the least to be feared, for its heart, like those of its individual members, remained kindly. Just as a French mob is cruel, because the French are not individually kind, just as a mob of Eastern Europeans is murderous, because its individual members are cowardly, and both because their immediate purpose, whether to kill or fly, is so deep-seated in them that no human power can check it, so the London mob was most easily diverted, because some happy accident might always arouse its sense of humour or the ridiculous and drown universal fury in a burst of laughter. As, again, though it might be anxious to break windows and, on occasion, heads, its innate kindliness checked it when hearts were in question—even those of an enemy.

So it was with panic ; of all crowds I would rather have been in one of Romwell at a moment of panic than in almost any other. The most terrible experience of my life was that of being involved in the panic-flight of a foreign army. From the moment they lost hope, the men ceased to be human beings. They ran straight before them, hurling themselves against obstacles without seeing them, beating down even those of their own comrades who came in their path ; throwing away their arms, accoutrements, even clothing, that they might flee the faster. Their very eyes showed that for the moment every trace of humanity had left them, that they were no more than a herd of maddened animals. On another occasion I was with British troops forced to retire under similar

circumstances, an error in leadership, an overwhelming attack, lack of support. They gave, they retreated, some of them ran—but there was no trace of panic among them. Instinctively supporting each other in little groups, as instinctively obeying the commands, whatever his rank or lack of it, of whoever showed himself capable of commanding, they gave back, fighting still, joking still for that matter, with the incurable light-heartedness which is the despair of foreign troops, until they were either killed or reinforced.

I was in a train on the New York Subway during the rush hours. It was, as always, packed to the last inch, mostly with that refuse of Europe which has made of the East Side its earthly Paradise, and does so much to bring discredit upon the name American. Something fused; there was a blinding blue flash and a burst of evil yellow smoke. In a moment the human cargo of the carriage had lost all self-command. Screaming, cursing, trampling upon each other, they made for the closed exits, and by the time, not thirty seconds later, when the train slowed into a station a dozen or more were so crushed and stricken that they must be carried off in ambulances.

A relative was in a London theatre when one of the wings caught fire. Smoke eddied over the stage, and a trickle of flame ran up the painted trees. In another moment panic might have started had not a tall man risen in the stalls and shouted, "Sit down, you asses, and don't make sheep of yourselves!" Something in the zoological comparison struck the audience as comic. The house rocked with merriment, and even

before the trifling fire had been extinguished all terror was forgotten.

I suppose this trick of finding humour in everything and most of all in yourself has its dangers, as my foreign friends insist. It may mean instability of temperament and the inability to distinguish between the ridiculous and the sublime; it might conceivably crack under the pressure of some great disaster and leave nothing but impotent despair in its place. At least it is a pleasant atmosphere in which to live, and if that day ever come, of which our Communist well-wishers love to dream, when England and the English go down to ruin in one red rack of destruction, they will leave none the less savoury a memory behind them because they met their fate with a smile—rather than a snarl!

A large crowd had gathered in the High Road as I came round the corner from the Grove. I knew, before I reached it, that something very exciting was happening. I could hear exclamations of pity and horror; tears were already running down the cheeks of some of the women. After a tense interval came a gasp of—I was not at once sure whether it was of astonishment or admiration. An outburst of cheering followed, fading into a dropping fire of laughter, and in two minutes the crowd had dissolved as rapidly as it had gathered.

Only then, from information supplied by half a dozen amateur reporters, most of them ladies, did I discover what had happened. A little cat or kitten had foolishly tried to cross the road without waiting,

as any wise cat would have done, until the traffic was held up. Half way across, terrified by the rush of cars and lorries and trams and buses, it wavered, stopped and endeavoured to rush back. Those drivers who saw it, for it was very small and grey and difficult to distinguish against the mud of the roadway, avoided it, exhausting I know not how many of its nine lives in the process. While the last still trembled in the balance, an omnibus only managing to avoid it by a hair's breadth, the crowd gathered and watched the impending tragedy with breathless interest. Already women sobbed; an old gentleman loudly offered his fortune to anyone who would save the little cat; a young woman was only prevented from rushing into the roadway by physical restraint. Then—a passing policeman, off duty, as his lack of blue-and-white armlet showed, noticed what was happening. He marched magnificently into the middle of the road, the traffic stopping automatically at sight of his extended arm. The little cat, recovering presence of mind, darted between his legs, foolishly regarding him as the enemy, evaded a dozen hands that were thrust out to catch and fondle it and dashed down an alleyway amid universal cheers and laughter. The crowd, breaking up into its elements, vanished, as it were, in a moment and left only the memory of its pitifulness behind it.

Of course it was all very silly and sentimental—but I have known cities where the crowd would have hissed the policeman who baulked it of so promising a tragedy.

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-SIXTH

ROMWELL OVER THE BORDER

I WAS on top of a motor bus hurrying back to London along one of the great arterial roads. We had stopped at the corner of a cross-road when I heard my name called. I looked up, to see that a very large woman and a very small man were signalling to me from a wooden shack beside the main road. When they caught my eye they beckoned invitingly. Then I saw that on the front of the shack were painted, by an uncertain hand, these words : " Old Bill from Avon Lane. Ralling point for old friends from Romwell. Teas. Minerals. Good pull-up for motors."

I remembered then that I had met the small man and had some talk with him in the matter of a smaller boy who, during some street game, flung a ball into his shop and knocked a ginger-beer bottle off the counter. Believing the shop empty, he ventured into it to retrieve the ball, only to find that the cunning Old Bill was awaiting him in ambush. In his panic flight he fell over my feet and so was caught, and would have received the punishment he merited had I not intervened to avert the Hand of Justice.

My impression is that Old Bill thought me a little deranged, for afterwards, whenever I passed his shop, as was not infrequent, he would greet me with a smile

that was at once pitying and patronising, and he evidently, as the sequel showed, took the trouble to learn my name, with what motive I do not know. His shop was one of the very many " tobacco, sweets and general," of which I have told you. It had an Italian name on the fascia, though Old Bill himself was typically of Romwell and was otherwise called Brimmett.

Because I am one of those foolishly shy people to whom it is an agony to be hailed, by name, in a public place and because my fellow-passengers on the bus-top were taking an embarrassing and jocular interest, I rose on the spur of the moment and, descending, obeyed Old Bill's invitation. I did not regret it, for it introduced me to a new and isolated part of my Borough, of which I should otherwise have known nothing. It taught me, too, though I had suspected it before that, however they may vary in externals, the souls of Cockney and Parisian have much in common. For I found that I had descended from suburban London—into Bleufontaine.

Supposing that, as seemed natural, Mr. Brimmett and his lady, to whom he introduced me ceremoniously, had shaken the dust of Avon Lane from off their feet and become definitely country-dwellers, I congratulated them on the step, concealing the surprise I felt. It was justified when Mr. Brimmett explained that the shack was not his principal residence, but his country seat, and that, like other people, he had acquired the week-end habit. He told me further that he had purchased his strip of land—paying

for it by instalments, of course—and with his own hands had erected the shack upon it. Later he proposed to add a shop-front—there being no " restrictions "—and to convert it into a regular branch of the Romwell business. A motor-bus route, which passed the end of Avon Lane, took you almost from door to door for tenpence, and he was in the habit of visiting the shack on alternate week-ends, leaving a daughter in charge at Avon Lane, which seemed to rise superior to the Shop Hours Act and to open on Sundays as well as week-days at all hours.

Mrs. Brimmett kindly gave me a cup of tea while he instructed me and afterwards suggested that he take me for a walk round to meet old friends. So we walked out into Bleufontaine.

There were, I think, stringent building laws dealing with such settlements. No doubt they were in force there also, though I saw no evidence of it, perhaps because the structures so far set up could scarcely be called buildings—unless indeed a rabbit hutch can be so termed. They were mostly of wood, save four or five melancholy little " bungalows " of much the same materials as those of Bleufontaine. There were as yet no roads, though shallow trenches had been dug across the muddy field, with signs at the corners indicating where roads would some day be. Old Bill pointed out gleefully that the names, like many of the inhabitants, had been imported from Romwell, and led me some distance through almost bottomless mud to show me the new Barnard's Grove and the new Radio Avenue, some day to be the shopping centre of

the new Borough. The whole settlement, flung down on a bare field, in a district which could never have been beautiful, was as deplorable an eyesore as anything the worst French " lôtissement " could show, and I found myself wondering what possible attraction it could have for Mr. and Mrs. Brimmett even for week-end visits.

There were many. The settlement was in spirit a part, an over-borders colony, so to put it, of the older Romwell and was almost entirely populated, at week ends, by people from the home Borough. They came down together by bus or charabanc and so returned. While in what might seem exile they were still at home, surrounded by their friends, and might continue uninterruptedly the gossip they had started twenty miles away. They had freedom from many of the restrictions to which they were unwillingly subject at home. They could make as much noise as they liked and as much mess as they wished, with no officious police, or sanitary inspectors, or janitors to say them nay. They could scatter their rubbish where they chose, so that the settlement was already eloquent in sodden newspapers and old tin cans. There being no roads, the children could wander at will without running into danger. One drawback there was—the nearest public house was a long mile away along the arterial road. But in this seeming bane Old Bill had found a blessing. Bringing down the necessary supplies from town, in bags and suit-cases, he retailed their favourite liquors to his friends, illegally, of course, and in secret, but at a pleasant

profit to himself and to everyone's entire satisfaction, so that I fear the inscription upon his outer wall was no more than a blind covering his real activities.

I had already seen that all along the bus route, which ended in what was once a characteristically beautiful old English village, the whole twenty miles or so was given over to variations of what I have called New Romwell. They varied considerably; the nearer to London the more thickly were they overbuilt, real streets and terraces of little red houses, differing only in minor detail from those of Manor Way, taking the places of Mr. Brimmett's shack, while the roads, or some of them, were already made and, no doubt, duly equipped with gas and water and electric lighting mains. But in genesis they were all precisely the same, and there could be little doubt that in ten years the whole long road would be a succession of the same conditions. No wonder that poor Mrs. Partington, who in her youth was wont to wander over these fields and pick the flowers that grew there, averted her face in horror as her car hurried her through the new desolation that had succeeded them.

At that time she might have still found some small consolation in the thought that, a mile behind the thin red rash that marked the omnibus routes, was still real country, as beautiful, as unspoilt, as deserted as was it a century ago. The last thing the inhabitants of New Romwell desired was to go walking in strange country. They preferred to remain in their bungalows, talking, some of them I fear drinking, listening to the wireless or the gramophone, sometimes, when

the fit seized them, doing a little gardening or visiting their friends in neighbouring shacks, until the time came to mount bus or charabanc and return to the older Romwell. But the reprieve can only be temporary. Already factories were following the houses, each quickly surrounding itself with dwellings for its workers, each spreading its little pall of smoke above the green. The trend was bound to increase; it offered, indeed, advantages so obvious in a dozen ways that it were difficult to offer any but sentimental objections. If no great political changes occur in the meantime, it seems certain that, in another century or so, every high road in England will be hedged solidly with houses, joining the great cities, while the spaces between them will have become new industrial centres scarcely less built over. For us of the Partington clan will remain always the consolation that there are other countries, too large rather than too small for the people who live in them, where we may find those untenanted solitudes we seek. At least it would seem certain that the people of Romwell can never again be thrust back into those tightly packed urban slums to which the earlier industrial age condemned them and that, despite all frenzied protest, the hope of preserving England as a sportsman's Paradise or Nature-lover's sanctuary is gone by for ever.

Scarcely more hopeful was the crusade for teaching the encroaching townsmen to protect, preserve, respect, even increase the rural beauty of their new homes. They, or very many of them, valued the country

the more as it grew more to resemble the town. It was characteristic that when I asked Mr. Brimmett whether he proposed, sooner or later, to abandon Avon Parade and settle in "Heatherview" (as he had called his shack, without apparent reason) he looked at me with surprise that was not far from horror. When the Tubes reached out so far, and there was choice of "pubs" and a cinema or two, he might consider it, but, until then, "Not on your life!" And not one New Romwellite to whom I spoke but was of the same opinion. Already, though I think only with the cunning purpose of attracting other settlers, a large board at the cross-roads announced that it was the site of a New Super-Talkiedrome, designed to accommodate 4,000 people. By the time it is built be sure the audience will be awaiting it.

Mr. Brimmett's week-end enterprise was due, again, not to any desire for country joys, but primarily to commercial ambition. He told me that the idea came to him from a statement in a weekly paper that there was money in tea-gardens. I think many like him must have read the same article, for at that time, three out of four of the huts and houses along the arterial road were either petrol filling stations and garages or exhibited signs offering teas, light luncheons and mineral waters. How many of them made the speculation pay—without so profitable a sideline as was Mr. Brimmett's—I have no means of knowing.

Very much of the squalid suggestion of such new settlements came from the determined untidiness of their inhabitants and visitors. Complaints were

universal of the desecration of every beauty-spot within fifty miles of the Metropolis by the casting away of old newspapers, bottles, salmon tins, cigarette cartons and what not, until, especially after Bank Holidays in summer, they very closely resembled municipal rubbish heaps. The causes for this unpleasant state of things were not any lack of "country sense" in the urban population, as was sometimes hopefully declared, hopefully as suggesting the possibility of an improvement by educational means. It was, as it seemed to me, largely due to the general decline of thrift; you do not see one-quarter of the untidiness in, for instance, a French popular resort. The French, a thrifty people, place too high a value on an empty paper bag, a used newspaper, or a broken bottle, to waste it, when by taking the trouble to preserve it they may add a sou or two to the hoard in the "bas de laine." They are, again, more amenable to minor discipline. Mr. Brimmett enjoyed throwing his broken bottles over the hedge, remembering that in London such joys were forbidden to him; he took all the more delight in scattering orange peel over a cowslip meadow because he knew that to do as much in Romwell Park would mean a police-court summons and a fine. Some there were, mostly I think among the women, who really did believe that the litter they left behind would be as carefully picked up by the local dustmen as would be the case in London. I heard of one woman of the kind who, in reply to a remonstrance about some flagrant instance of untidiness, declared indignantly that there were those who were paid to

pick it up, and why shouldn't they do their work as well as other people had to do ?

It was perhaps in its influence on foreign public opinion that this instinct to do abroad what you were not permitted to do at home showed itself most unfortunate. Presumably the itch for foreign travel which maddened Romwell and her sister Boroughs at the time was a result of the European War. Not only had the majority of the men of younger middle age taken part in the struggle and thus come to realise that " foreign parts " existed ; their mothers, wives and sisters later followed them, too often on the tragic errand of visiting their graves. The railway companies took the hint, mass-suggestion did the rest, and by the time I came to Romwell, a trip to Boulogne, a week-end in Paris, or even " a week in lovely Lucerne for Five Guineas," had become commonplaces of the ever-lengthening holiday seasons. To such a degree was this carried that France took alarm, and Paris newspapers published more or less serious articles, insisting that, owing to the lower cost of living in France, consequent on the deflation of the franc, all the English unemployed were being shipped across the Channel by a perfidious Government, to make the " dole " go farther.

No doubt, as we have been told so often, foreign travel widens the intelligence, though I remember that the only impression Mrs. Mellon brought back from Boulogne was that the French were quarrelsome. It is eminently desirable that the nations get to know each other better, if only it be their better and not their

worst sides they get to know first. Unfortunately that widespread impression that "What does it matter how I behave where nobody knows me" is apt to be misunderstood abroad. The vast majority of the new generation of foreign travellers were as well behaved as their neighbours. An English hotel proprietor in Paris told me that he even preferred the post-war trippers to the richer class who patronised him when he first set up his business, for they were less exacting and better mannered, while their smaller spending power was offset by their greater numbers. Unfortunately there were exceptions, such as those with whom my American friend came into contact on his first arrival in Europe, who had, one must fear, made the journey to Boulogne less from any desire of studying France and the French than because they had been told they could buy strong drink at lower prices and during longer hours than at home, and that if they did happen to get drunk, it wouldn't matter, because nobody there knew them.

It is not for me to complain. Save for that meeting in Boulogne, I might not have been led later to go in search of the English as they are and not as their ill-wishers report them on evidence so slight. I only wish I could have taken the authorities of Boulogne along with me.

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-SEVENTH

WHITHER?

As I climbed up the lower slopes of the hill and came out upon the crest, I saw that my favourite seat was occupied. It was the more annoying because the day was very clear and I had been looking forward to the view over the wide valley of the Thames.

It was the same hill-top upon which, as I think, those old Romans chanced when they spied out the valley that is now London two thousand years ago, and the seat is on its very summit, and gives, on a clear day, one of the noblest prospects in all the world.

As I came up behind them I saw that the intruders were Charley Wilson and his wife, Lettuce. They had brought with them the new baby (in the newer carriage, just purchased on the hire system), that was the glory of their lives, and the mongrel dog that Charley had rescued, at the peril of his own life, from under the wheels of a taxicab the very day on which the baby was born.

Evening was already closing in and a faint mist veiled the valley, so that the bolder features of the vast city loomed up above it, the great dome of St. Paul's set upon its hillock, and the towers of Westminster and beyond them the steep outlines of the northern heights, sheerly precipitous against the luminous blue. That sky was almost cloudless, save where a grey

shadow crept from the eastward, and in mid-heaven, hanging over Westminster, shone one great star.

Charley and his wife were sitting close together at the end of the bench. One of her hands was in his, the other dwelt protectively upon that of the baby, strapped in his carriage at her knee. All three were gazing skywards with something wistful in their faces, following with their eyes the splendid star that marked the glory of England. Only the mongrel dog ignored it, keeping his eyes always turned towards the face of the master who had saved him.

It seemed that I had looked at them for but a minute, but when again I turned my face towards the darkling landscape there was a change. The mists had risen so fast that already the valley was full of them; so that only the cross on the dome and one flag, drooping on the tallest tower of Westminster, overtopped them still. The great star hung where it did, but already the grey shadow had crept far across the sky, growing always darker, reaching up long envious fingers towards the star.

Once more I looked at the silent group on the hill-top above me, and saw that their faces had not changed. But when I sought the English star again the grey shadow covered all the sky and the star was lost behind it. Darkness swept over the lower world; only the faces shone out clearly in some reflected light from above, and I saw that their eyes were still turned upwards.

A cold wind fluttered the branches and I went silently down the hill—thinking.

Clouds pass away; the stars endure.

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